



JOURNAL OF ANCIENT HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY



Institute of Archeology and Art History of
Romanian Academy Cluj-Napoca
Technical University Of Cluj-Napoca



Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v10i3>

ISSN 2360 266x

ISSN-L 2360 266x



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No. 10.3/2023

CONTENTS

STUDIES

ANCIENT HISTORY

Stanislav GRIGORIEV

ORIGINS AND MIGRATIONS OF THE THRACIANS 5

Haggai OLSHANETSKY

THE BEST EVIDENCE FOR JEWISH SERVICE IN THE ROMAN ARMY: A NEW LOOK AT THE JEWISH EXEMPTIONS FROM MILITARY SERVICE AS APPEARING IN JOSEPHUS, AND JEWISH MILITARY SERVICE IN THE LATE REPUBLIC AND EARLY PRINCIPATE 30

Rada VARGA

NEGOTIATOR ALLECARIUS: NOTES ON A VERY RARE OCCUPATIONAL TITLE 46

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL AND REPORTS

Beatrice CIUȚĂ

NOVEL ARCHAEOBOTANICAL INSIGHTS AND NEW AMS C14 DATING FROM THE SANCTUARY OARȚA DE SUS-GHIILE BOTII (MARAMUREȘ COUNTY, ROMANIA) 53

Cristian Ioan POPA

CONCERNING BRONZE AGE FUNERARY FINDS FROM MEDIAȘ 65

Vitalie BÂRCĂ, Cristinel PLANTOS, George Valentin BOUNEGRU, Andrei MELINCIANU

PRELIMINARY DATA ON THE RESCUE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS OF ALBA IULIA — REPUBLICII BLVD. NO. 3 75

Alexandru GUDEA, Călin COSMA, Cristian MARTONOS

FRAGMENTS OF A SECOND AVAR HORSE DISCOVERED IN SÂNCRAIU DE MUREȘ
AN ARCHAEOZOOLOGICAL REPORT 136

Akin TEMUR, İlknur GULTEKIN GENC

SEBASTOPOLIS EXCAVATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE BYZANTINE CHURCH 146

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOPOGRAPHY

Cristina-Georgeta ALEXANDRESCU, Christian GUGL, Gerald GRABHERR, Barbara KAINRATH

MILITARY AND CIVILIAN SITES IN THE HINTERLAND OF TROESMIS (TURCOAIA, TULCEA COUNTY, RO) 162

Florin-Gheorghe FODOREAN

MAPS OF ROMAN DACIA. IV. GRIGORE TOCILESCU AND „LA DACIE ROMAINE” IN 1900 171

NUMISMATICS

Nathaniel S. KATZ

LEGIONARY COINS IN THE YEAR OF THE FOUR EMPERORS 174

Metodi MANOV

THE COINS OF PAUTALIA FOR CLODIUS ALBINUS AS CAESAR (193 – 195) – A PHENOMENON OF ROMAN PROVINCIAL COINAGE 187

DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL HISTORY

María-Pilar MOLINA-TORRES

METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY OF ROMAN EPIGRAPHY WITH DIGITAL SUPPORT (HISPANIA 3.0) 196

IN MEMORIAM

Marius-Mihai CIUȚĂ

IN MEMORIAM BARBARA DEPPERT-LIPPITZ.
A DESTINY UNDER THE SIGN OF TREASURES 204

REVIEWS

Annamária – Izabella PÁZSINT

THIBAUT CASTELLI, CHRISTEL MÜLLER (EDS.), *DE MITHRIDATE VI À ARRIEN DE NICOMÉDIE : CHANGEMENTS ET CONTINUITÉS DANS LE BASSIN DE LA MER NOIRE ENTRE LE IER S. A.C. ET LE IER S. P. C., ACTES DU COLLOQUE DE PARIS NANTERRE, 2 ET 3 MARS 2018*, BORDEAUX, AUSONIUS ÉDITIONS (SCRIPTA ANTIQUA 166), 2022, 278 P., ISBN 978-2-35613-526-1. 208

Csaba SZABÓ

REVIEW: *CORPUS SIGNORUM IMPERII ROMANI. NORTH MACEDONIA, VOLUME 1/1. SCULPTURE IN THE ROUND*. EDITED BY VERA BITRAKOVA GROZDANOVA, ALEKSANDRA NIKOLOSKA, MACEDONIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ART AND RESEARCH CENTER FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE “CVETAN GROZDANOV”, SKOPJE, 2022, PP. 302, ISBN 978-608-203-358-7. 210

Onur Sadık KARAKUŞ

ERIKA MANDERS, DANIËLLE SLOOTJES (EDS.), *LEADERSHIP, IDEOLOGY AND CROWDS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE OF THE FOURTH CENTURY AD*, HEIDELBERGER ALTHISTORISCHE BEITRÄGE UND EPIGRAPHISCHE STUDIEN, BAND 62, FRANZ STEINER VERLAG, STUTTGART 2020, 200 PAGES, ISBN 978-3-515-12407-2. 213

Design & layout:
Petru Ureche

THE BEST EVIDENCE FOR JEWISH SERVICE IN THE ROMAN ARMY: A NEW LOOK AT THE JEWISH EXEMPTIONS FROM MILITARY SERVICE AS APPEARING IN JOSEPHUS, AND JEWISH MILITARY SERVICE IN THE LATE REPUBLIC AND EARLY PRINCIPATE

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Abstract: This article aims to re-examine the exemptions from military service that were given to the Jews in the Late Republic, conserved to us in Josephus' writings. The extent of these exemptions and their number are part of a long, extensive scholarly debate. This article wishes to prove that there were only two original exemptions, one issued by Lentulus and one by Julius Caesar, that were limited in their extent, and that there was never a general exemption for all the Jews. It will also be shown that the other exemptions are only edicts renewing the previous two. Moreover, it will be proven that the Jews served no less than their percentage in the general population, and that extensive Jewish service started in the middle of the 1st century BCE. By showing this and highlighting the vast number of Jews that were in the domain of the Roman Republic at the time, especially in the city of Rome, the current article will stress that there was no logical reason to give a general exemption to the Jews in a time of war. And so, an attempt to delve into the logic behind the exemptions, their extent, and the reason for their creation, will be made. Another aspect which will be addressed is the role of the local Roman administration in issuing edicts, their extensive understanding of the different minorities, including the Jews, and the legislative tradition of not creating precedence.

Keywords: *Second Temple Judaism, the Roman Army, Roman Civil Wars, Julius Caesar, Josephus Flavius.*

DOI: 10.14795/j.v10i3.883
ISSN 2360 – 266X
ISSN-L 2360 – 266X

Much of the knowledge on Jews up to the end of the 1st century CE comes from the extensive works of Josephus Flavius. Without his texts, knowledge and ongoing research on Judaism in the Second Temple Period would have been severely constrained. Because Josephus' writings are the sole source on so many matters, they should be used with caution.¹ However, it is almost impossible to refer to the Jews

¹ Applebaum says the same with regards to Josephus' writings, in connection to the exemptions from military service: APPLEBAUM 1965, 612.

during the period in question without his input, especially when discussing Jewish military service in the Roman army. In this regard, exemptions from military service are of key importance, which led to them being at the centre of academic debates throughout the years. But these debates were incomplete and, at times, incorrect.² For example, Eck recently claimed that Jews were exempted from service until the reign of Constantine, without supporting or sufficiently explaining this statement. Moreover, Eck neither cites nor refers to the exemptions in Josephus' writings, or any publication that deals with Jewish service in the armies of the Empire. Thus, the current article will prove that this claim needs to be seen as unsubstantiated.³ Furthermore, the exemptions that Josephus mentions seem to have had a prominent place in shaping the opinions of some scholars who believe that the dietary laws and the Sabbath were an obstacle for Jewish service in the Roman army.

One recent publication, penned by Raúl González Salinero, who does not see the Jewish faith as an obstacle for service, supposedly devotes an entire chapter to these exemptions, yet analysed them inadequately.⁴ For example, Raúl González-Salinero incorrectly stated in his book that: "...Dolabella, the Caesarean governor of Syria, wrested Asia from the grip of legate C. Trebonius and extended the former military exemption to Jews without Roman citizenship..."⁵ Equally problematic is his summarised analysis of the exemptions:

"...we do not have enough reliable information to categorically state that, after the Augustan period, these favourable concessions to Jews included exemption from military service or that this exemption remained fully in force throughout the remainder of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. However, even in the unlikely case that it had been so, we must assume that this exemption would have been revoked, at least in what concerns the Jews of Rome and Italy, by Emperor Tiberius in the fifth year of his reign (19 CE)."⁶

² Oppenheimer's article is a good example. He mentions the exemptions, but does not analyse them in the context of Jewish military service: OPPENHEIMER 2005B, 420–421; in addition, it is very surprising that in Rajak's important article from 1984 'Was there a Roman charter for the Jews?', the exemptions received very little attention, with only one sentence on page 116, and one short paragraph on page 120 devoted to them: RAJAK 1984; yet, her important conclusions regarding the corpus of documents in Book XIV of *Jewish Antiquities* cannot be understated. Josephus tried to create an impression that there was constant and widespread special treatment for the Jews. However, Rajak showed that this was not the case as all the documents Josephus collected were limited in their coverage and timespan. The current article is in line with this assertion, and tries to emphasise that the exemptions from military service must be viewed in the same manner that Rajak treated the entire corpus of documents compiled by Josephus into Book XIV. Gruen also briefly mentions the exemptions in the chapter "Jews in the Province of Asia", usually in a few scattered sentences, without discussing them in length nor bringing them in full or analysing the text. It is even more surprising that he assumes that Dolabella gave a general exemption to all the Jews: GRUEN 2005, 84–104.

³ ECK 2021, 248; moreover, as the current article will show, there is no evidence for any exemption from military service after the year 14 BCE.

⁴ Around half of the chapter does not even discuss the exemptions: GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2022, 26–32; the only pages that deal with this topic in his book are: GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2022, 32–39.

⁵ GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2022, 34.

⁶ GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2022, 38–39.

While erroneously claiming that a general Jewish exemption for military service existed for a limited period, González-Salinero does not conduct an extensive debate as to how many exemptions were written, nor does he discuss the reasons behind the issuing of such exemptions, despite saying: "It is certainly significant that such apparently counter-intuitive decisions would have been adopted in such a context of armed conflict and political instability."⁷ But were they really counterproductive or illogical, as González-Salinero suggests?⁸ Subsequently, the current article will try to amend this misconception, and offer an answer to the numerous issues, questions and loopholes that remain in the research of these military exemptions.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to provide a fresh look at the exemptions of Jews from military service in the Late Republican Roman army and the Early Roman Principate Army. Common questions will be asked, such as who was exempt, how many exemptions there were, and whether there was a general exemption for all Jews who lived in the Late Republic and the Early Empire.⁹ This article will try to provide different and definitive answers to these widely discussed questions,¹⁰ for example by showing that there is no foundation for the assumption that a general Jewish exemption from military service ever existed. In addition, the question whether such exemptions were unique will once again be raised, and new aspects will be explored, such as how the exemptions can shed light on the complex Roman administration, or illuminate how the Romans perceived the Jews and Judaism. Through this examination, the logic behind the issuing of such decrees can be found.¹¹ Furthermore, this article will show that these exemptions are significant evidence for Jewish military service in the Roman army, and are possibly even strong evidence for a considerable and continuous service,¹² rather than an indication that only a meagre number of Jews enlisted or volunteered into the Roman Army, as was previously suggested. The article will view the exemptions in light of a broad historical context and the mounting evidence for Jewish military service in the Roman armies,¹³ which most probably continued from the

⁷ GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2022, 32.

⁸ In his 2003 article, Salinero writes that there were many exemptions, and it seems that he sees them as referring to the entire Jewish population. According to the exemptions, he concludes that the Romans sometimes issued exemptions against their own good, contradicting any logic: GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2003, 45–51; in his recent book, he refers to the exemptions in a different tone, but still does not offer a new innovative analysis of them. Furthermore, half of the chapter dedicated to the exemptions does not deal with them at all and when he does discuss them, numerous errors were made. See note 4 above.

⁹ Roth claims that the widely held view is "...that Jews were exempted from conscription and auxiliary units could not be raised in Judaea." He says that this was true until the Great Jewish Revolt, but it never stopped them from volunteering: ROTH 2007, 417.

¹⁰ Regarding the different debates, their complexity and the different claims on the exact number of exemptions and their scale, see: BEN-ZEEV 1998, 140–148, 151–162, 164–167, 169–172, 174–175, 183–185.

¹¹ See note 8 above.

¹² That is in contrast to Applebaum's claim: "But the fact remains, that outside the borders of Judaea, where the descendants of Herod held their own forces (some of them gentiles), and maybe outside the borders of Syria, not many more Jews served in the army": APPLEBAUM 1965, 612–613.

¹³ Especially as Gruen's analysis of the exemptions was hampered by his lack of references providing evidence for Jewish military service in the Roman Army: GRUEN 2002, 87.

1st century BCE until the 5th or 6th century CE.¹⁴ Historical parallels will also be examined in order to better understand the logic behind such exemptions, and to better grasp how they were implemented and used.

THE FIRST FOUR TESTIMONIES FOR THE EXEMPTION GIVEN BY LENTULUS, 49-48 BCE

In Book XIV of *The Antiquities of the Jews* (*Antiquities*), Josephus compiled all exemptions and privileges given to the Jews by the Romans, including the exemptions from military service granted by Lentulus, Caesar and Dolabella. In this section of his work, Josephus gathered and quoted any papers he could discover in the Imperial Archive in Rome to demonstrate the Romans' high regard for Jews.¹⁵ While Josephus does not present the documents chronologically, they will be presented in this manner in the article to better understand their contents. Regarding Josephus' collection of documents, it is critical to refer to these exemptions as Rajak did in her pioneering article on the corpus of documents found in Book XIV as a whole, rather than as many other scholars do, who consider the exemptions separate from the rest of the corpus.¹⁶

Six distinct documents are mentioned by Josephus that pertain to an exemption, or exemptions, granted by Lucius Cornelius Lentulus Crus. The earliest four documents refer to the same edict, which he issued when he was sent by the senate to Asia Minor to raise two legions for the war against Caesar. The earliest version of this exemption that still exists is dated to the 19th of June, 49 BCE:

"Lucius Lentulus, consul, declares: in consideration of religious scruples I have released those Jews who are Roman citizens and appeared to me to have and to practice Jewish rites at Ephesus. Dated the twelfth day before the Kalends of July".¹⁷

This exemption's phrasing is repetitious and nearly identical to three of the five other documents that refer to an exemption or exemptions granted by Lentulus. The earliest of the three other documents was delivered by unknown persons after June 19th, and it outlines the circumstances surrounding its issue.¹⁸ The next one is from the 19th of September, 49 BCE, and relates to the same exemption that was granted three months earlier. This entry, however, is the

¹⁴ Regarding the continuous nature of Jewish service, at least until the 5th century, see: OLSHANETSKY 2018; this current article is mostly focused on the exemptions, and not on the evidence for the service itself. The new book by González Salinero, and an article of mine that were recently published, are the most extensive and most current presentation of a significant amount of the available evidence, and proving, beyond any doubt, that extensive Jewish service existed in the Roman armies at least from the middle of the 1st century BCE until the 5th century CE and, to some extent, until the 6th century CE: Haggai Olshanetsky, OLSHANETSKY 2021A; GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2022; although González-Salinero did not claim so despite the extensive material he presents.

¹⁵ GRUEN 2002, 85.

¹⁶ As Rajak shows in her article, Josephus tries to create the impression that Jews received special rights and exemptions for all sorts of civic and imperial activities. However, while Josephus may have tried to create the impression that this was a widespread and continuous situation, all the documents that he collected were local and limited in both time and space: RAJAK 1984.

¹⁷ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.234 (Trans. by Ralph Marcus, LCL).

¹⁸ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.236–237.

first to be included in Josephus' book.¹⁹ The last document that refers to the same exemption from June 19th was written at an unknown date. Although it appears to be the most recent, this is the most comprehensive and well-preserved version of the original decree.²⁰

These four declarations imply that the initial exemption was exclusively granted to Jews with Roman citizenship who adhered to Judaism in a certain way. Accordingly, as most Jews did not have Roman citizenship, the exemption only pardons a small number of Jews, while giving the person in charge of recruiting extensive discretion.²¹ Therefore, it is clear that these four exemptions do not include a blanket exemption for all Jews.²²

It is worth remembering that Lentulus was in the midst of a civil war and desperately needed troops. As a result, he was unlikely to exempt large groups of people from military service. Thus, it seems that he preferred to exempt certain Jews in order to receive approval from the Jewish community to extensively recruit the rest. Perhaps Lentulus' act was a gesture, i.e. I exempt some of the Jews to ensure the recruitment of others. There are similarities between this exemption and the Israeli Compulsory Military Service Act today, which allows an arrangement, known as "The Torah is His Belief," that exempts Yeshiva pupils from serving. This religious exemption in the modern state of Israel was established during the Israeli War of Independence, in a manner similar to Lentulus' edict. During this war, 400 of the most prominent Yeshiva students were exempted so that the Rabbinical Leadership would allow for broad recruiting among their communities.²³ Rather than a general exemption, this exemption was initially temporary with very rigorous criteria, and was planned to be in effect for only one year.²⁴

¹⁹ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.228–229.

²⁰ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.237–240.

²¹ Smallwood claims that the number of Jews who were exempt from military service was "infinitesimally small" and had no significance to the general war effort: SMALLWOOD 1976, 127.

²² Applebaum claims in a long forgotten, non-academic paper in Hebrew, that there is no basis to the assumption that Jews received a general exemption, and if such an exemption had been given to the Jews of Asia with Roman citizenship, it was given ad hoc and as part of an inseparable, political manoeuvre during civil war: APPLEBAUM 1965, 612.

²³ 'October 48': the Prime Minister David Ben Gurion responded in the security committee of the State Council that: "There are 400 Yeshiva students, who are all of young age, and if they would be drafted, there would be a need to close the yeshivas, and that also in other countries they were exempt and there was an agreement for them to be exempt." Taken from: BEN HAIM 2002; regarding the original extent of the exemptions, see: BARAK-EREZ 2006, 229–230.

²⁴ This is already clear from the earliest form of the exemption issued in March 1948, even before the official declaration of independence of the state of Israel. The formal beginning of the arrangement is an instruction issued by the head of the National Headquarters, Galili, on the 9.3.1948, to all the brigades of the IDF that were being established at the time. According to this, all the yeshiva students were to be released from service, but would receive some military training in the case that their service will be needed due to the severity of the situation. The instructions said as follows: "A decision had been made that the yeshiva pupils, according to authorised lists, are exempt from military service. All the able students will receive a training for self-defence at their place of study, by the order of the Knesset (a nickname for the Hagana organisation). This decision would be valid for the entire year of 1948, at the end of the year the issue will be re-examined. The training of the yeshiva pupils needs to be regularised in such a manner that would not undermine the study regime in the yeshivas." Taken from: The Committee for formalising



Fig. 1. Map of the Roman Republic in 58–44 BCE. © Historicair/Wikimedia Commons.

Lentulus' edict and its language indicate that the Romans could distinguish between different Jews and their beliefs/religious practices. This might be attributed to the Roman Civil Administration, who influenced the phrasing owing to their knowledge of the Jewish people gained through their long service in the east. It is even possible that Lentulus himself encountered Jews earlier in his military career, or in another manner. Thus, he may have previously learned about Jewish customs and religious distinctions. All of this implies that the Romans had a broader understanding of Judaism and its sects than is often assumed.²⁵

TO WHAT EXTENT WERE THE JEWS IMPORTANT?

To assess the exemptions, it is necessary to consider the Jews' numerical and military significance. These are the exact questions Lentulus would have asked before issuing any exemption from service to Jews during a time when men were in short supply. According to Josephus, there were millions of Jews in the Roman Republic, and they were visible throughout the Roman world.²⁶ However, some scholars today disagree with the figure given by Josephus. They offer different estimates and assertions, claiming that the millions of Jews living under Roman Imperial control

made up between 5% and 15% of the total population.²⁷ Nevertheless, in the year 49 BCE, Egypt, with its considerable Jewish community, was not yet directly under Roman rule and Judaea was not yet a province, but just a vassal kingdom. Yet, other large Jewish communities, including those in Syria, Asia Minor and the community of the city of Rome, were among the Roman Republic's residents and citizens (Fig 1).²⁸ Thus, in order to comprehend the numerical significance of Jews in the Republic, the size of the Jewish community in the city of Rome in the year 19 CE will be investigated. This analysis may reveal the percentage of Jews in the army. The recruitment of the Jewish community of the city of Rome by Emperor Tiberius to combat pirates in Sardinia,²⁹ will be

an appropriate agreement on the subject of the recruitment of yeshiva students – a report headed by the judge Tzvi A. Tal; This exemption still exists today with changing criteria and procedures, even though it was originally supposed to cease to exist after the war of Independence.

²⁵ GOODMAN 2008, 366–368.

²⁶ Josephus quoted Strabo, who had said that Jews were present in all the cities, and it was difficult to find a spot in the inhabited world that the Jews had not reached or settled in: Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.114.

²⁷ For the difficulty in determining the size of populations in antiquity, and for a few estimates of the number of Jews and their percentage in the general population of the Roman Empire, see: MCGING 2002; Israel estimates that the number of Jews in the Roman era was between 4.5 to 7 million with the majority living under Roman rule: ISRAEL 2020.

²⁸ From the story of the Jewish gold in the Roman treasury, and its disappearance, it is possible to learn about the importance of the Jewish community in the city of Rome, and the size of the Jewish communities in Laodicea, Apamea, Adramyttium, and Pergamum (Pergamon). The gold was intended for the Temple in Jerusalem, and it seems that most of it was composed of the half (or third) shekel tax that every Jewish man or household had to pay annually to the Temple. The sums that are mentioned in this event by Cicero are proof of the large Jewish communities in the mentioned cities, and their vicinities. Furthermore, the pressure that the Jewish community of the city of Rome inflicted in this incident is an indication that even in such an early period, the Jewish community in the city was vast and significant: Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28.66–69.

²⁹ Josephus mentions the fact that they were sent to fight in Sardinia; Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.83–84; Tacitus explains that they were sent to Sardinia to fight brigands: Tacitus, *Annals* 4.85; Suetonius mentions that Jews were sent to serve in regions where the climate was bad for health; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36.

used as a case study to arrive at these figures.³⁰ The incident is documented by Josephus, Suetonius and Tacitus,³¹ who mentioned that the recruiting was carried out in order to placate the Roman nobles, who feared the rising influence of Judaism, particularly among many wealthy ladies who began to practise Judaism or donate money to the Jewish community.³²

According to Josephus and Tacitus, there were 4,000 Jewish recruits,³³ and according to various sources, all those who were recruited were of military age.³⁴ This number prompted researchers to speculate and allege the existence of a Jewish-only legion.³⁵ However, the lack of evidence for the founding of a new legion during this time period suggests that there was no such legion. Yet, the mentioned detachment may have been composed of several Jewish cohorts. These cohorts, who were either part of different legions or independent Auxilia cohorts, were gathered for an ad hoc mission, which was a common Roman practice.³⁶ Furthermore, the figure of 4,000, while not considered particularly high, can be used to demonstrate the existence of a sizable Jewish population in the city of Rome.

The usual age for recruitment in the Early Empire was 18 to 20, although there were soldiers who enlisted at an older age, with 35 being the higher enlistment threshold.³⁷ During periods when Rome was hard pressed to find soldiers, even older men up to the age of 42, were recruited.³⁸ If Josephus and Tacitus are correct, it would mean there were at least 4,000 Jewish men between the ages of 18 and 42 in the year 19 CE.

It is safe to assume that no more than half of the applicable Jewish men were recruited as either many of them

were not fit for service,³⁹ or found a way to evade the draft, while many others refused to serve on religious grounds and, as a result, were expelled from the city.⁴⁰ Therefore, it can be assumed that the Roman army recruited, at most, a third to half of the men of the relevant ages. This would imply that the Jewish congregation of the city of Rome (or the city and its surroundings, or central Italy as a whole) had between 8 to 12 thousand free Jewish men aged 18 to 42. As a result, it may be assumed that there were between 16 to 24 thousand free Jewish men and women aged 18 to 42 years old. In addition, 60% of all those who reached the age of 18 would live to be 45, and that the majority of the population was under the age of 18.⁴¹ Thus, from this information, it is possible to deduce that the Jewish community of the city (and possibly its vicinity) had a population of 50 to 100 thousand free people, which equals 5% to 20% of the city of Rome's overall population, whose estimated population ranges from half a million to a million residents. This ratio of Jews to Romans in Rome could be comparable to the ratio of the Jewish to the non-Jewish population throughout the Roman Empire. This statistic may also be used to calculate the proportion of Jews in the Roman army in the year 19 CE.

Most Jews in the Empire did not have Roman citizenship during this year, and so could only serve in auxilia units. Moreover, the Jewish population in Rome was small in comparison to the millions of Jews in the Empire. Hence, it is most probable that for every free Jewish male residing in the city who was recruited in that year, there were at least two free Jews who enlisted or volunteered to serve in the army who were not from the city of Rome. This would suggest that at least 12,000 Jewish soldiers served in that year alone. There is a consensus today that in the Early Empire, half of the Roman army consisted of Roman citizens serving in the legions, while the other half consisted of residents without Roman citizenship who served in the auxilia. At this time, various estimates place the whole army at 280,000 to 300,000 troops during this period.⁴² Combining the above data suggests that at least 4% of all men serving in the army were Jews. This figure may appear to be low, but given that this represents the lower estimate, and that the percentage of Jews among the residents of the Empire is suggested to range from 5% to 15%,⁴³ it is possible to claim that Jews served no less than their proportion in the

³⁰ Most historians, even when speaking about Jewish military service in the armies of Rome, refer to this event with only a short mention, if at all: APPLEBAUM 1965, 618; SCHOENFELD 2006, 118; GOODMAN 2008, 369.

³¹ Rocca dedicates an entire article to this recruitment and the testimonies depicted in Tacitus, Suetonius and Josephus, but he does not use this recruitment and its numbers to learn about the Jewish community and its size in the city of Rome through the number of Jewish conscripts: ROCCA 2010; further evidence regarding this expulsion can be found in the writings of other authors and historians of Antiquity, but they usually speak only of the expulsion itself. For example: Dio, *Historia Romana* 5.18.5a.

³² Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.81–83.

³³ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.83–84; the number 4,000 is also mentioned in the writings of Tacitus regarding the same event: Tacitus, *Annals* 4.85.

³⁴ Tacitus says that the Jewish recruits were of military age: Tacitus, *Annals*, 4:85; Suetonius does not mention the number of Jewish recruits but claims that all those of military age were drafted: Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 36.

³⁵ The idea that this may have been a Jewish legion was suggested by Rocca: ROCCA 2010, 21.

³⁶ This opinion contradicts Speidel's. Speidel tried to resist the idea that Jewish units ever existed in the Roman army. And so, in his attempt to show that they never existed, he says, "Yet Rome never raised regular army units from Jews, let alone elite ones – only penal gangs to be wasted in hunting down robbers under evil skies, as Tacitus says." SPEIDEL 1996, 164; in this statement, he clearly refers to the recruitment of Jews in the city of Rome in the year 19 CE, which is supported by ample evidence from both Suetonius and Josephus. Speidel does not show how he came to his conclusion, and it seems he completely disregards Suetonius' and Josephus' testimonies and overturns Tacitus' testimony to fit his claim.

³⁷ ROTH 1999, 11.

³⁸ There are only a few accounts on the recruitment of under 18-year-olds, and even then, it seems that this was against the norm. In addition, there is no evidence for the recruitment of men older than the age of 42 at enlistment: ROTH 1999, 11; HERTZ 2007, 306–307; WESCH-KLEIN 2007, 439.

³⁹ Regarding the recruitment criteria, such as height, see: ROTH 1999, 9–10; OPPENHEIMER 2005B, 422

⁴⁰ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.83–84.

⁴¹ It is crucial to remember that life expectancy in the Roman Empire was much lower than today. However, this was due to the fact that infant mortality was especially high, with a third to half of all children up until the age of 5 dying. It seems that a child who reached the age of 18 had a good chance to live until old age. According to the life expectancy graph of the period, 75% of those who reached the age of 18 also reached the age of 35, 69% the age of 40 and 60% the age of 45. This would mean that about a third of all military recruits would have died during their 20 to 25 years of service. See: SCHEIDEL 2007, 426.

⁴² For different estimates for the size of the Imperial Roman army during different periods, see: LIEBESCHUETZ 1993, 265; WHITBY 2007, 517.

⁴³ When Rocca writes about the recruitment of Jews from the community of the city of Rome in 19 CE, he also refers to the exemptions. He sees this recruitment as proof of the obligation for Jewish citizens to serve, and uses this to claim that the exemption given by Julius Caesar was temporary and for a specific cause. See: ROCCA 2010, 17–18.

general population. Of course, this is only true if the figures provided by Josephus and Tacitus are correct. Nevertheless, the growing evidence for Jewish military service in Rome's army supports the premise that Jews served in proportion to their number in the general population.⁴⁴ This may in turn support the possibility of continuous Jewish military service, at least until the 6th century CE.⁴⁵ This is hardly unexpected given that there is ample evidence that Jews served in all major armies of the great foreign empires preceding Rome, including the Assyrian,⁴⁶ Persian,⁴⁷ and the Hellenistic kingdoms.⁴⁸

The size of the Jewish congregation in the year 19 CE confirms that there was a large Jewish community in the city of Rome for decades before 19 CE, when the edicts and exemptions were issued.⁴⁹ This deduction reinforces and broadens the understanding of the existence of a large Jewish community in the capital during the Late Republic,⁵⁰ highlighting the fact that there were numerous Jews in the Empire, and thus were considered a vital recruiting pool in a time of forced mobilisation due to a raging civil war. It further suggests that Jews served as their percentage of the general population. Therefore, there was no justification for any Late Republican Roman commander to exempt them from service when the same leaders desperately needed soldiers to reinforce the ranks of their army. Moreover, there is no report of the Roman administration amending existing laws or establishing any new laws in the recruitment of 19 CE, which is consistent with Roman custom that what is older is deemed more respectable and usually better. This approach may have encouraged them to work with current laws rather than enacting new and unnecessary legislations.⁵¹ This attitude implies that Jewish cohorts, or at the very least Jewish subunits, may have existed in the Roman army prior to 19 CE. Yet, even more importantly, this demonstrates that there was no Jewish exemption from military service

that needed to be abolished or overlooked. This is especially evident in Josephus' works, as there is no mention of an abolishment or a disregard of special rights given to Jews in this context in his texts, unlike in the case of the Jews of Ionia in 14 BCE which will be addressed in detail later.⁵²

THE LAST TWO DOCUMENTS CONNECTED TO THE EXEMPTIONS OF LENTULUS, 49/48 BCE, AND THE JEWISH SERVICE IN POMPEY'S ARMY

These two documents were most probably written and decreed after the four that were previously presented. They appear to have been composed after the 19th September, 49 BCE, and maybe as late as 48 BCE.⁵³ The two documents are notably distinct from the rest of the corpus, both in nature and language, which led some scholars to believe that all the Jews in Asia Minor were exempt from military service. The first of the documents says:

"Decree of the Delians. In the archonship of Boeotus, on the Twentieth day of the month of Thargelion, business introduced by the generals. The legate Marcus Piso, when resident in our city, having been placed in charge of the recruiting of soldiers, summoned us and a considerable number of citizens, and ordered that if there were any Jews who were Roman citizens, no one should bother them about military service, inasmuch as the consul Lucius Cornelius Lentulus had exempted the Jews from military service in consideration of their religious scruples. You must therefore obey the magistrate".⁵⁴

The document above is not a direct quote of any exemption or edict issued by Lentulus, and the date of the document on which Marcus Piso relied upon while speaking before the people of Delos is unclear. The provenance of the original document is uncertain, possibly because Josephus' clerks, who located and copied the documents at his request, may have copied the originals partially or incorrectly.

When looking at the above exemption's phrasing, it seems that this case probably represents how the clerks in the Roman administration of the city of Delos used their own discretion when specifying who was qualified to be exempt. This emphasises the ambiguity of Lentulus' original order and argues that it was written in this manner to give the local Roman authorities some leeway. Moreover, it was in Lentulus' best interests to leave it vague, as there was no legitimate reason for exempting vast numbers of people from military duty during a time of war. A further detail lending credence to this assumption is the fact that no exemption was given to an entire nation, national, or religious group in any period in Roman history. Even academics who claimed that the exemptions granted to the Jews were not unique were unable to provide more than three other exemptions of any kind, be it to communities or to athletes, two of which were written at a much earlier date. These other exemptions were awarded to small professional groups, such as the Dionysiac Artists, in the years 146 BCE and 84 BCE, and

⁴⁴ Regarding Jews in Roman armies, the articles and chapters offering a wider perspective (presented in chronological order), are: CASTRITIUS 2002; GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2003; OPPENHEIMER 2005B; 2005A, 183–191; SCHOENFELD 2006; ROTH 2007; CHOMIAK 2008; ROCCA 2010; WEISMAN 2012; OLSHANETSKY 2018, 2021A; GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2022; OLSHANETSKY 2023; other articles that deal with specific or a few finds, but do not deal with the general phenomenon of Jewish military service: APPLEBAUM 1971; WOODS 1992; SCHARF 1997; ECKER 2022.

⁴⁵ See note 14.

⁴⁶ DALLEY 1985; OLSHANETSKY 2017, 2021B.

⁴⁷ Regarding military service in Persian armies, the Jewish garrison in Elephantine is the most researched. See, for example: PORTEN 1968.

⁴⁸ There are only a few works that concentrate on Jews in Hellenistic armies: HENGEL 1974, 12–18; 1980, 85–92; OLSHANETSKY 2016, 2019.

⁴⁹ The origin of the Jewish community in the city lies in the mid-2nd century BCE. The first evidence that we have for this community refers to the expulsion of Jews from the city of Rome in 139 BCE, when they tried to convert gentiles: Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta memorabilia* 1.3.3; Servius, *Commentarii in Vergili Aeneida* 8.187.

⁵⁰ First and foremost is the testimony of Cicero preceding Caesar's civil war regarding the Jewish gold incident, which was mentioned previously: Cicero, *Pro Flacco*, 28:66–69; Suetonius tells us that the Jews mourned the death of Julius Caesar, more than any other. As a result, they came to mourn near the funeral pyre for several days. The cremation was held in the city of Rome and so, Suetonius' words are valid evidence for a significant Jewish presence and supports the existence of a sizable Jewish community in the city: Suetonius, *Divus Iulius*, 84.5.

⁵¹ OLSHANETSKY 2021A, 135–136.

⁵² Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 16.27–29.

⁵³ For the date of the exemption and its different debates and references, see: BEN-ZEEV 1998, 168–172.

⁵⁴ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.231–232 (Trans. by Ralph Marcus, *LCL*).

the exemption given to the victors in the Sacred Games, issued by Marcus Antonius (Fig. 2) during the civil wars.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Jews were not alone in having a complex set of beliefs/religious practices, with numerous traditions and restrictions regarding food.⁵⁶ For example, the Egyptians and Phoenicians were known to have numerous sects and numerous traditions regarding the consumption of food.⁵⁷ Yet, there is no evidence that another religion or nation has ever been exempt, not even in the most temporary or local and limited scale.

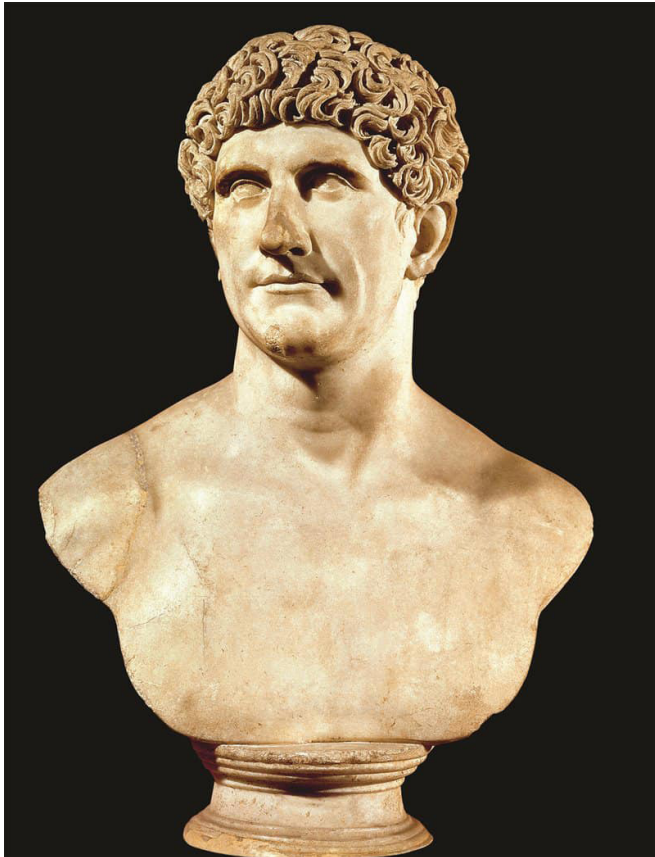


Fig. 2. Marble bust of Marcus Antonius created a century after his death. Found near Tor Sapienza before Porta Maggiore in 1830 or 1831. Today it is part of the collections of the Vatican Museums, Chiaramonti Museum. © Wikimedia Commons.

The phrasing of Piso’s words, as well as the fact that he exempted the Jews of Delos who had Roman citizenship while remarking that Lentulus exempted all Jews, whether they had Roman citizenship or not (by not mentioning any criteria that Lentulus provided), can be attributed to a

⁵⁵ It is unclear if it was issued in 42/41 or 33/32 BCE. Although Ben Zeev claims, in bringing this as an example, that the exemptions given to the Jews were not unique, she adds underneath that it is interesting to note that the exemptions given to the Jews were the only ones given to an ethnic or religious group: BEN-ZEEV 1998, 161–162.

⁵⁶ This is true not only for the Roman world, as in any culture, there are things that can be eaten but were not, for different cultural reasons, and each culture had its own food customs: ROSENBLUM 2015, 351; as was recently shown, the Roman logistical system was built in such a manner that enabled any servicemen, no matter his beliefs and traditions, to keep them while serving: OLSHANETSKY 2023.

⁵⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.11.12; Origen, *Against Celsus (Contra Celsum)* 5.41; Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 1.14; 2.61.

variety of reasons. Firstly, it may have possibly been due to a misunderstanding of the Roman administrative staff in the city. Secondly, it could have occurred due to their idleness and a desire to avoid dealing with the issue. Thus, they decided to excuse all Jews with Roman citizenship, regardless of their beliefs, and hid behind the claim that Lentulus granted an even greater exemption. Finally, there may have been unusual circumstances that prompted them to exempt all Jews with Roman citizenship in the city. Therefore, this document should only be regarded as evidence of the Roman Empire’s decentralised character in the Late Republic, as well as evidence of how the local Roman administration functioned. Moreover, due to this and contrary to popular belief, it cannot be used to stress the existence of a blanket exemption for all Jews.⁵⁸ Another primary reason for this is that Lentulus’ authority was most likely physically restricted to the province of Asia, rather than encompassing all of the Roman Republic’s provinces.

The last document that relates to a decree issued by Lentulus says the next:

“Titus Ampius Balbus, son of Titus, legate and propraetor, to the magistrates, council and people of Ephesus, greeting. Lucius Lentulus, the consul, has at my petition exempted the Jews in Asia from military service. And on making the same request later of Fannius, the propraetor, and of Lucius Antonius, the proquaestor, I obtained my request; and it is my wish that you take care that no one shall molest them.”⁵⁹

The most essential thing to note about this passage is that it is neither the actual decree, nor does it reference any of Lentulus’ original documents. This quote is from a separate edict issued by Ampius Balbus, son of Titus, and implies that Lentulus did indeed grant a blanket exemption from military duty to all Jews in Asia at one point. Such an exemption is difficult to establish when no other national or religious groups have a similar exemption. Moreover, such a general exemption would be illogical and would contradict the entire purpose of Lentulus’ visit (to recruit soldiers for war). Could he have excused a large number of people while he was understaffed and in desperate need of soldiers for his ranks? This was probably not the case, since Lentulus had previously recruited even gladiators during this same civil war while he was in the south of Italy.⁶⁰ Because gladiators were slaves during this period, it was considered a controversial act against Roman tradition. As a result of the negative public sentiment, he finally freed the gladiators and only employed them for specific, informal security tasks.

As previously stated, the last two pieces of evidence presented by Josephus were documents that were not issued directly by Lentulus. Their date of issue is unknown, and they do not reference or directly acknowledge the issued edict they refer to. The second of the two, which was issued by Balbus, has a personal, bragging tone to it, potentially

⁵⁸ This analysis supports Trebilco’s view that there was not a single charter for all the Jews, and that none of the documents presented by Josephus (including the exemptions) were a “general reference” and so were not universally applied to all the Jews: TREBILCO 1991, 10.

⁵⁹ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.230 (Trans. by Ralph Marcus, *LCL*).

⁶⁰ Julius Caesar, *Civil War* 1.14.

claiming the acquisition of a more general exemption than the one he truly obtained. In general, it appears that the first four documents presented are more accurate, as they are earlier and connected to each other, and they lengthily quote the original edict. Moreover, these four documents are further supported by the writings of Appian of Alexandria, a historian from the 2nd century CE. Although his works cover the history of Rome until the reign of Emperor Trajan, only the pre-Augustan period has been preserved.⁶¹ According to his history, Jews actively participated in the Caesarean Civil War:

“Besides the Greeks almost all the nations of the Levant sent aid to Pompey: Thracians, Hellespontines, Bithynians, Phrygians, Ionians, Lydians, Pamphylians, Pisidians, Paphlagonians; Cilicia, Syria, Phoenicia, the Hebrew people and their neighbours the Arabs; Cyprians, Rhodians, Cretan slingers, and all the other islanders.”⁶²

As can be seen from this quotation, Jews participated and served in Pompey’s armies (Fig. 3), who fought against Julius Caesar (Fig. 4). Because the Arabs are named as the



Fig. 3. Marble bust of Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, Augustan copy of a 70–60 BCE original. Today it is part of the collections of the Venice Museo Archeologico Nazionale. © Wikimedia Commons.

⁶¹ STERN 1980, 178.

⁶² Appian of Alexandria, *Bella Civilia*, 2.71.294 (trans. H. White, *LCL*. with some amendments).

Jews’ neighbours, it is plausible that the Jews participated as a vassal kingdom, i.e. the Kingdom of Hyrcanus. However, it appears that this passage also discusses Jewish service in the regular Roman army for several reasons. Firstly, as the majority of the mentioned areas and nations named are directly ruled by the Republic, they are not vassal kingdoms. Secondly, the unique use of the term “Hebrew people” (Εβραίων γένος),⁶³ may have been employed to signify and stress that Jews participated and served as both an allied kingdom, and as inhabitants and citizens of the Republic.⁶⁴ It would have been more appropriate to use the name Judaea if simply referring to the vassal state, or the designations Judaea or Palaestina if referring to the geographical territory.⁶⁵ Appian of Alexandria used the term people/nation (γένος) for the Jews only on two other occasions: once for the entire Jewish nation,⁶⁶ and once for the Jews of Egypt, when they were defeated by Emperor Trajan during the Diaspora Revolt.⁶⁷ He never used this term to refer to Jews in Judaea or its subjects. This quote implies that Jews fought in the Caesarean Civil War regardless of region, lending credence to the idea that Lentulus’ exemption was not general and was only intended to facilitate the recruitment of the majority of Jews, including those who enlisted of their own free will in addition to those drafted.

THE EXEMPTION GIVEN BY JULIUS CAESAR IN OCTOBER, 47 BCE.

The next exemption that Josephus quotes is one issued by Julius Caesar (Fig. 4):

“Gaius Caesar, Imperator, Dictator for the second time, has ruledand in addition they shall also pay tithes to Hyrcanus and his sons, just as they paid to their forefathers. And that no one, whether magistrate, or pro-magistrate, praetor or legate, shall raise auxiliary troops in the territories of the Jews, nor shall soldiers be allowed to exact money from them, whether for winter-quarters or on any other pretext, but they shall be free from all molestation.”⁶⁸

⁶³ Except for this occasion, he used the term Jews, and not Hebrews: Appian of Alexandria, *Syriacus Liber* 50.252; Appian of Alexandria, *Mithridaticus Liber* 106.498; Appian of Alexandria, *Mithridaticus Liber* 114.556; Appian of Alexandria, *Mithridaticus Liber* 117.571–573; Appian of Alexandria, *Arabicus Liber* F19; Appian of Alexandria, *Bella Civilia*, 2.90.380.

⁶⁴ Regarding the term and the fact that it has been used by different authors since the 1st century CE, see: STERN 1980, 187; Stern also says in the same text: “The Jewish soldiers at Pharsalus were sent by Hyrcanus and Antipater, then loyal supporters of Pompey. They presumably constituted part of the forces led from Syria by its governor Scipio, the father-in-law of Pompey, who commanded the centre in the battle of Pharsalus.”

⁶⁵ During the period in which the events took place, the term Judaea was the main one in use. But when Appian of Alexandria wrote the text, the term was changed to Syria Palaestina. There is always the chance that because of this change, he searched for a different term instead of Judaea. Yet, this is not a sufficient explanation for why he used the term “Hebrew people”, as it is a very unique one. He himself used the term Palaestina for the region in the same text: Appian of Alexandria, *Bella Civilia* 5.7.31; regarding the history of the terminology used for the region, see: LEWIS 1982, 58–60.

⁶⁶ Appian of Alexandria, *Syriacus Liber* 50.252.

⁶⁷ Appian of Alexandria, *Bella Civilia* 2.90.380.

⁶⁸ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.202–204 (Trans. by Ralph Marcus, *LCL*).

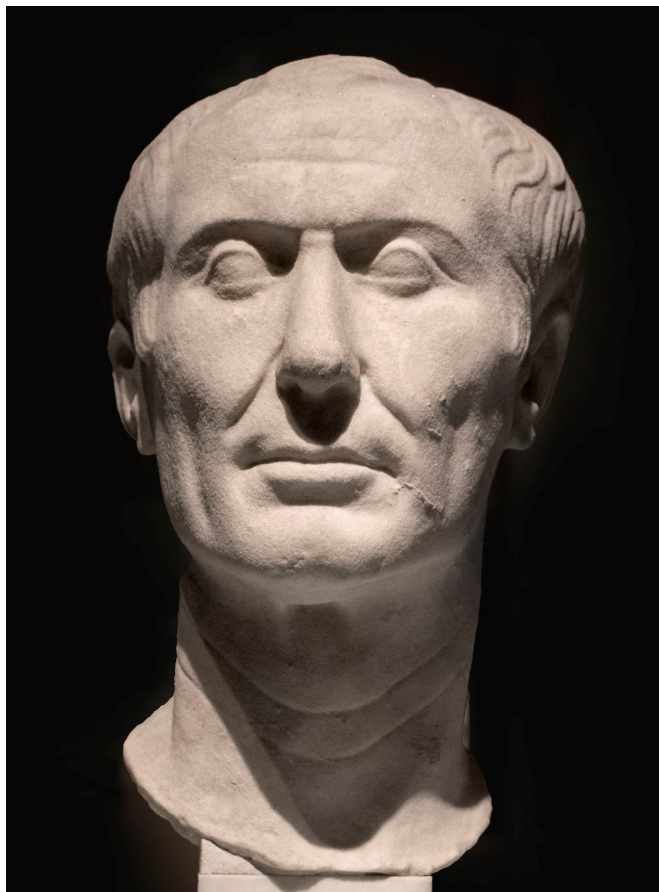


Fig. 4. Marble bust of Gaius Julius Caesar. Discovered in Tusculum, near Frascati, during the excavations by Luciano Bonaparte between 1804 and 1820. Today it is part of the collections of the Turin Museum of Antiquities. © Wikimedia Commons.

This exemption also produced significant confusion, giving the impression that the Jews were generally excluded from military service.⁶⁹ However, Julius Caesar's exemption did not apply to all Jews, but only to those who lived in King Hyrcanus' Kingdom. Furthermore, no mention of an exemption is made in this paragraph. It was not necessary for the Romans to recruit the residents of Hyrcanus' kingdom into their army, as Hyrcanus could have recruited them himself. As a vassal king's army, Hyrcanus' army aided the Romans in their campaigns and wars, such as during the attempt to relieve the besieged Julius Caesar in Alexandria.⁷⁰ Thus, Caesar's decree offers compelling evidence for Jewish military service since, as with the other exemptions mentioned earlier, there would have been no reason to issue such an exemption unless Jews were truly recruited. In this case, it is the subjects of King Hyrcanus' kingdom who were recruited into the Roman *auxilia*, which were composed of soldiers who did not have Roman citizenship. In the *auxilia*,

⁶⁹ This could be understood from what Smallwood said: SMALLWOOD 1976, 128; for the dating of this document, and the different debates around it, see: BEN-ZEEV 1998, 80–85.

⁷⁰ This assistance is mentioned a few times by Josephus: Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.127–139; Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.190–195; Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.52–53; it is interesting to note that in Julius Caesar's book, *The Alexandrian War*, there is no mention of any participation or assistance from the forces of the kingdom of Hyrcanus, commanded by either Antipater or Hyrcanus.

citizenship was granted at the completion of a full service in the *auxilia*, providing great inducement to enrol.⁷¹

If the Jews of Judaea were not being recruited into the Roman army, Hyrcanus had no need to petition Julius Caesar to cease such recruitment into the ranks of the *auxilia*. This is the greatest evidence for the recruitment of Jews from Judaea into the Roman army at such an early period. It also emphasises Rome's pressing need for enlisted soldiers during a time of numerous external and internal conflicts. Moreover, this exemption highlights that a universal exemption for all Jews, regardless of location, would have been the direct opposite of the Roman tradition of not creating precedence and issuing exemptions.⁷² Issuing a general exemption during a time of crisis would have been counterproductive. This exemption rather proves the Romans' desire for Jews to serve in the army, to the point that they endeavoured to recruit them outside of the Empire's official borders and in the territory of a vassal kingdom.

THE EXEMPTION GIVEN BY DOLABELLA IN 43 BCE, AND THE JEWS THAT FOUGHT ALONGSIDE CASSIUS

On the 24th of January 43 BCE, Dolabella, as governor of Asia during the civil war that followed Julius Caesar's murder, gave or reaffirmed an exemption for Jews.⁷³ The following is the testimony that Josephus presented:

“One of these envoys Hyrcanus sent also to Dolabella, who was then governor of Asia, requesting him to exempt the Jews from military service and permit them to maintain their native customs and live in accordance with them. And this request he readily obtained; for Dolabella, on receiving the letter from Hyrcanus, without even taking counsel, sent to all (the officials) in Asia, and wrote to Ephesus, the chief city of Asia, about the Jews. His letter read as follows. In the presidency of Artemon, on the first day of the month of Lenaeon, Dolabella, Imperator, to the magistrates, council and people of Ephesus, greeting. Alexander, son of Theodorus, the envoy of Hyrcanus, son of Alexander, the high priest and ethnarch of the Jews, has explained to me that his fellow-citizens cannot undertake military service because they may not bear arms or march on the days of the Sabbath; nor can they obtain the native foods to which they are accustomed. I, therefore, like the governors before me, grant them exemption from military service and allow them to follow their native customs and to come together for sacred and holy rites in accordance with their law, and to make offerings for their sacrifices; and it is my wish that you write these instructions to the various cities.”⁷⁴

This decree is particularly intriguing since it expressly states that Dolabella was not the first to provide an

⁷¹ WEBSTER 1979.

⁷² This is the opposite of González Salinero's conclusion, who claimed that the Romans were in the habit of issuing exemptions which were against common sense or their own good: GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2003, 45–51.

⁷³ Regarding the research on this document, its references, and its dating, see: BEN-ZEEV 1998, 137–148

⁷⁴ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 14.223–227 (Trans. by Ralph Marcus, *LCL*).

exemption, implying that it is referring to either Lentulus' or Julius Caesar's exemption. Second, the requirement to extend/renew an exemption suggests that Jewish recruitment is taking place during this time period.⁷⁵ This could imply that each exemption was geographically and temporally restricted, thus necessitating a renewal. More crucially, the justification of the exemption, the Jewish rights and dietary laws, stands in stark contrast to the massive amount of evidence for Jewish service in the Roman armies during the Empire's lifetime.⁷⁶ This abundant evidence for Jewish service plainly demonstrates that Jewish rights and dietary regulations did not deter many Jews from enlisting and serving. Therefore, these rights and dietary laws are insufficient to justify exempting Jews,⁷⁷ and especially not for issuing a blanket exemption.

Dolabella's edict, like those that were issued before his, was disseminated during a period of war. As previously claimed, there is little logic in giving exemptions during such times, especially universal exemptions for large populations. Additionally, it appears that the document's language may reveal the true number of exclusions granted throughout that decade. Furthermore, despite Dolabella's powerful assertion, he never drafted a new or general exemption,⁷⁸ but simply renewed a limited, existing one. This might have been the initial exemption granted by Lentulus, who exempted only Jews with Roman citizenship and only at the discretion of the local administrator/s based on their understanding of Jews and their religion/religious practices. In such a case, Dolabella's edict is identical in its constraints and criteria as Lentulus'.⁷⁹ This is most probable since Dolabella's edict was sent to Ephesus, yet this possibility also depends on what Hyrcanus meant when using the term *πολίτας*, which was used to refer to those who were to be exempt. For whom was the exemption requested for - his people, his countrymen, his co-religionists, or Roman citizens like him (because Hyrcanus, like other vassal kings, was granted Roman citizenship)?⁸⁰ Out of these possibilities, only the term *countrymen* would not be in line with a renewal of Lentulus' edict.

And so, there is a further, albeit weak, alternative in which Dolabella renewed Julius Caesar's edict. This would imply that he once more prohibited the forced recruitment (otherwise why would an exemption be necessary) of men from Hyrcanus' realm into the *auxilia*. This possibility exists

⁷⁵ Smallwood was aware that this was a renewal of an edict, yet neglected to note that if it was being renewed, it would mean that recruitment was already occurring: SMALLWOOD 1976, 128.

⁷⁶ See note 44 above.

⁷⁷ Regarding the fact that the Roman soldiers' diet and logistical system was built in order for any serviceman to keep his dietary laws, see: OLSHANETSKY 2023.

⁷⁸ Gruen's phrasing can be understood as such in two instances, but it is possibly bad phrasing and not his intention: GRUEN 2002, 89, 93–94.

⁷⁹ While Smallwood was aware that this was a renewal of a former exemption, she thought that due to the lack of criteria mentioned in the edict, the exemption was expanded to include all the Jews of Asia Minor. However, it seems illogical, improbable and counterproductive for Dolabella to do so. From what Dolabella said, there is no real reason to suggest that he did anything other than renewing the old exemption word for word: SMALLWOOD 1976, 128.

⁸⁰ Regarding all the different translations and suggestions for *πολίτας*, see: BEN-ZEEV 1998, 142

because the plea to Dolabella came from Hyrcanus. However, this is only feasible if he meant his countrymen (or to a lesser extent, his people) in the term *πολίτας*. This is doubtful, though, for a variety of procedural and practical reasons. Firstly, the edict was sent to Ephesus. Secondly, Dolabella may not have had jurisdiction over Hyrcanus' Kingdom, as when Dolabella took control of Asia while siding with Marcus Antonius, his adversary Cassius was in control over Judea:

“So when Cassius had secured possession of Syria, he set out for Judaea on learning that the followers of Caesar who had been left behind in Egypt were approaching; and without any difficulty he won to his cause both them and the Jews.”⁸¹

As can be seen from this text, Cassius not only had direct control over Judea, but the Jews wholeheartedly supported him. In addition, the text implies that while Hyrcanus' Kingdom and army were recruited to aid Cassius, Jews from Syria and Egypt may have also joined their cause. Therefore, Hyrcanus' plea to Dolabella is perplexing. It is possible that Hyrcanus' appeal was motivated by his desire to safeguard the Jews of Asia from joining what he believed would be the losing side, or by his desire not to combat his fellow Jews. Furthermore, Dolabella's edict may have intended to ensure an easier recruitment for most of the Jews in territories under his authority, while exempting a select few as Lentulus did. Lastly, and no less importantly, Dolabella may have issued this edict to improve his image, and possibly even to gain support among the Jews in the territories he intended to conquer after securing Asia. An extract written by Dio Cassius, a historian from the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, implies that this may have been his intention:

“Dolabella, accordingly, after becoming in this way master of Asia, came into Cilicia while Cassius was in Palestine, took over the people of Tarsus with their consent, conquered a few of Cassius' guards who were at Aegae, and invaded Syria.”⁸²

Thus, it is possible to conclude that in a decade of civil wars, the Jews were only granted two exemptions, one by Lentulus and one by Julius Caesar. The first was awarded solely to Jews who were strict in their religious practices, together with different criteria and in accordance with Lentulus' or the Roman representative's view on Judaism. Accordingly, it was first exclusively awarded to such Jews in Ephesus who held Roman citizenship, and was eventually extended to such Jews having citizenship in the province of Asia. Julius Caesar issued an edict a year or two later prohibiting the recruitment of Hyrcanus' subjects into the *auxilia*. As previously noted, the subsequent exemption was not truly an exemption because the Romans employed Hyrcanus' army for their own purposes. Finally, it appears that Dolabella did not issue a new exemption but only renewed one of the previous two, most probably the one issued by Lentulus.⁸³

⁸¹ Dio, *Historia Romana*, 47.28.3 (trans. E. Cary, *LCL*).

⁸² Dio, *Historia Romana*, 47.30.1 (trans. E. Cary, *LCL*).

⁸³ It seems that Trebilco was mistaken in his statement that Dolabella exempt all the Jews in Asia from military service, especially because he claimed that Lentulus exempt only Jews with Roman citizenship in the

THE EXEMPTION ISSUED BY AGRIPPA IN 14 BCE, AND THE MILITARY ASSISTANCE THE JEWS PROVIDED

Jews continued serving in the Roman army after the civil wars that brought the end of the Republic and the death of Marcus Antonius (Fig. 2). They served in the ranks of the Roman army as well as in the vassal Kingdom of Judaea's army. Strabo of Amaseia, who lived in the 1st century BCE and CE, described this in his work *Geographica*:

"But when he [scil. Aelius Gallus] realised that he had been thoroughly deceived, he built one hundred and thirty vessels of burden, on which he set sail with about ten thousand infantry, consisting of Romans in Egypt, as also of Roman allies, among whom were five hundred Jews and one thousand Nabataeans under Syllaes."⁸⁴

This evidence for Jewish military service as an ally army, or soldiers of the Empire, was referenced just once in relation to Jewish military service.⁸⁵ This passage clearly demonstrates that Jews served in the army, or at least in Roman campaigns as troops supplied by an allied army, and so the Romans were familiar with their culture and religion, and their logistical system was structured in a way that enabled these soldiers to observe their religious practices, especially the dietary laws. The previously mentioned exemptions were either already abolished, disregarded or, as with Caesar's exemption and the army of the kingdom of Judea, not really an exemption,⁸⁶ because even if its residents were not directly recruited to the Roman army, troops from the kingdom's army actively assisted and participated in Roman campaigns and wars. Another expedition in which Jews participated was Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa's campaign in the East, which King Herod and his army assisted. This incident is linked to the final known military exemption, or a renewal of one.

Josephus mentions the incident and decree not in the document section in book XIV, but rather in a tale in book XVI of *Antiquities*. Hence, this decree did not receive the same attention as the ones mentioned previously.⁸⁷ The event in question occurred in 14 BCE, when King Herod arrived in Ionia (Ephesus being the largest city in the area), after assisting Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa's (Fig. 5) military campaign in the Bosphorus. The Jews of Ionia complained to Herod about the treatment they received from the Roman administration. One of their primary grievances was that they were recruited into the army, despite having previously secured an exemption:

"It was also at this time, when they were in Ionia, that a great multitude of Jews, who lived in its cities, took advantage of their opportunity to speak

out freely, and came to them and told them of the mistreatment which they had suffered in not being allowed to observe their own laws and in being forced to appear in court on their holy days because of the inconsiderateness of the examining judges. And they told how they had been deprived of their monies sent as offering to Jerusalem and of being forced to participate in military service and civic duties and to spend their sacred monies for these things, although they had been exempted from these duties because the Romans had always permitted them to live in accordance with their own laws."⁸⁸

The exemption discussed by the Jews who petitioned Herod and Agrippa appears to have been for a local conscription, since they never claimed that there was a general one for all Jews in the Empire. It seems that they simply complained that an exemption granted to the Jews of their area was not respected. It is important to highlight that if there was a general exemption for all Jews in the Empire, there would have been no need to disclose it to Herod, but only to complain about being recruited. Furthermore, if there was a universal exemption, Josephus would not have needed to bring all the documents that referred to local ones,



Fig. 5. Marble bust of Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, ca. 25–24 BCE. Found in 1792 in Gabii, now part of the collections of the Louvre Museum. © Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons.

previous sentence: TREBILCO 1991, 17.

⁸⁴ Strabo of Amaseia, *Geographica*, 16.4.23 (trans. H. L. Jones, *LCL*).

⁸⁵ GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2022, 30, 69 n. 180.

⁸⁶ It is most probably referring to the assistance of the army of the kingdom of Herod that was mentioned by Josephus, and not Jewish soldiers in Roman units: Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 15.317.

⁸⁷ The only historians who wrote about Jews in the Roman army and referred to this story and this exemption, dedicated only a few sentences to it: GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO 2003, 49–59; OPPENHEIMER 2005B, 415; ROTH 2007, 420–421.

⁸⁸ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 16. 27–28 (Trans. by Ralph Marcus, *LCL*).



Fig. 6. An Audience at Agrippa's. A modern representation of such an event. Oil on canvas, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1876. © Wikimedia Commons.

nor would he have needed to indicate that the Jews of Ionia had to justify why they were excused from military service before that time. After all, only the most educated of people would have read Josephus' writings and would have known for themselves if there was such an exemption. It is possible that the exemption that the Jews of Ionia were referring to originally derived from the edict issued by Lentulus a few decades previously.

Herod appointed Nicolaus of Damascus to represent the Jews of Ionia in front of Agrippa (Fig. 6). The answer that Nicolaus and the Jews received from Agrippa strengthens this assumption, since Agrippa only ordered the protection and renewal of the privileges that had previously been granted to the Jews:

"Thereupon Agrippa, who perceived that they had been subjected to violence, replied that because of Herod's goodwill and friendship for him he was ready to grant the Jews all they might ask for, and he said, their requests seemed just in themselves, so that even if they were to ask, for still more, he would not hesitate to give them this, provided, of course, that it did not cause the Roman government any trouble. And since they asked that the rights which they had formerly received should not be annulled, he would confirm their right to continue to observe their own customs without suffering mistreatment."⁸⁹

It is important to note that Agrippa never mentioned exemption from military duty in his response. Yet, it is possible that in his response, he also meant to renew the exemption from military duty granted to the Jews of Ionia by Lentulus, which was most probably limited only to those with Roman citizenship.

After the exemption renewed by Agrippa, there are neither new exemptions nor the renewal of old ones, as none were found by Josephus nor by anyone else since. This sudden cessation in the issuance of exemptions can be connected to the Roman world's transition from the Republic to the Principate. Local administration and provincial administrations had less influence under the Principate than they had during the Republic. In the case of exempting Jews from military service, the last exemption presented was unique as Agrippa, who may have renewed an existing exemption, was able to do so because of his privileged rank and personal connections to the reigning emperor, Augustus (Fig. 7). Agrippa was unique as he was not a provincial governor but a higher ranking official with higher status. In addition, it is important to view the exemptions in light of the personal relationships and internal politics of the Roman Empire,⁹⁰ such as the relationship between certain Roman officials and Hyrcanus II, and Herod. Such relationships ceased shortly after Herod's death as there was no longer a viable Judean Kingdom,⁹¹ which is another convincing



Fig. 7. The statue Augustus of Prima Porta. It was found on April 20, 1863, during archaeological excavations at the Villa of Livia, directed by Giuseppe Gagliardi. This villa was owned by Augustus' third wife, Livia Drusilla. © Wikimedia Commons.

explanation for why no exemption, even of the most local nature, were issued, or could be found by Josephus, after the ones presented in this article.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The way the exemptions are presented by Josephus is the best way to disprove two main hypotheses. The first claimed that there was a general exemption for all Jews in the Empire,⁹² while the second hypothesis suggested that there was an exemption for all Jews in Judea in the entire 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE.

If a universal exemption for all Jews existed before or during Josephus' lifetime, he would have certainly stated it and explained why it was granted. The fact that Josephus recorded every local and temporary exemption that had been issued more than a century before he wrote his books determines that exemption from military duty granted to specific Jews was unusual, and certainly did not exist during

⁸⁹ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 16.60–61 (Trans. by Ralph Marcus, *LCL*).

⁹⁰ This supports what Trebilco wrote on the matter of the plea in front of Agrippa: "It is likely that personal factors and the diplomacy they made possible were more significant in gaining support for the Jewish communities than any real sympathy for the Jews on the part of the Roman leaders": TREBILCO 1991, 11.

⁹¹ The Kingdom of Herod Agrippa I was not as important and prevalent as his grandfather's realm. The same can be said about the Kingdom of

Batanaea of Herod Agrippa II, that did not even rule Judea.
⁹² MCCASLAND 1943, 65–71; ROTH 2007, 412–413, 417; ECK 2021, 248.

Josephus' lifetime. After all, Josephus was a member of the court of Emperor Vespasian and of his sons Titus and Domitian, and so he had full access to all the archives of the Empire. Nonetheless, he was unable to find even one exemption, or a renewal of one, after the year 14 BCE. This is an indication that during his life, and even before, Jews were not exempted from military duty, even at the regional level. It is critical to recall that all of the exemptions mentioned by Josephus, which referred to direct Roman authority, were local, limited in time, and granted to a fraction of the Jews. These exemptions were given to Jews with Roman citizenship who observed Judaism in a way that the Romans considered problematic for military service or deserving of an exemption. It is very similar to the concept "The Torah is His Belief" that was introduced in Israel in 1948. With this concept, certain Jews were exempt from military service, provided they met particular requirements connected to their religious practices, whereas the majority of Jews were recruited (either voluntarily or forcibly drafted). Such an exemption and its criteria imply that the local Roman civil government had better knowledge of Judaism and its many different shades than it is usually credited to.

It is possible to deduce from Josephus' writings that there were only two unique exemptions. The first was issued by Lentulus to Jewish citizens who practised Judaism in certain ways, first for the city of Ephesus and later extended to the rest of Asia Minor, and the second by Julius Caesar, which was not actually an exemption. Caesar forbade the recruitment of Jews from the Kingdom of Hyrcanus into the Roman *auxilia*. However, the army of the vassal King Hyrcanus assisted Julius Caesar in his campaigns. The Romans disliked precedence and so they tried not to grant any exemptions, particularly general ones. Exemptions for Jews were unique, especially given all of the constraints they included. Following Lentulus and Caesar, political and military authorities avoided broadening the scope of the exemptions and, at best, ratified the existing ones. The phrasing of the edicts, and the necessity to renew them because they were violated or ignored,⁹³ may be the greatest evidence for Jews serving in the Roman army, including being conscripted (rather than just volunteering), even in such an early period. The fact that Josephus, who had access to all the archives of the Empire, could not locate even the most local exemption after 14 BCE proves that there were none, and all the previous exemptions were disregarded or deliberately not renewed. All of this, alongside other evidence for Jewish participation in the civil wars as an allied army, and extensive evidence for Jewish service in the ranks of the Roman army over the next 600 years, allow us to define the beginning of a considerable Jewish military presence in the Roman army no later than the middle of the 1st century BCE.

⁹³ This is also the ultimate proof that Oppenheimer's claim, that the exemptions were still valid during Augustus's reign, is wrong: OPPENHEIMER 2005B, 420.

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