

The Jews in Alexandria

The composition of Alexandrian society in the first century CE

- Romans (political dominance)
- Greeks (cultural and economic dominance)
- Jews (on the path to economic dominance, deprived of citizenship)
- Egyptians (on the bottom of the society, frustrated, resentful, aggressive)

The pogrom in 38 CE

Violent pogrom rocked the Jews of Alexandria in 38 CE. They were subjected to fearsome indignities, physical attacks, beatings, torture, and murder; their homes were burned, their shops looted, and their synagogues destroyed.

- The episode has indeed become emblematic of the vulnerability of diaspora existence, the shaky character of the Jewish place in a Gentile community, and the seething distaste of the Hellenes for that alien ethnos in their midst.
- The devastating set of events raises issues of a broad scope: the degree to which civic rights and privileges were enjoyed by different groups within a *polis*, the access of Jews to full citizenship, the nature of their organization within the larger community, the changes and complexities introduced into a multi-ethnic Hellenistic city by the advent of Roman administration, and, not least, the ambiguities and dangers involved in treading a fine line between assimilation and distinctiveness.

Collective violence

- The Gentiles drove Jews into a single district of the city, looted Jewish homes and shops, stripped many Jews of their professions and livelihood, and left them in dire economic straits.
- And that was just the beginning. The pogrom now began in earnest. Mobs used stones and clubs to pummel Jews, swords for execution, and flames to destroy not only homes but trapped families, mocking victims as they tortured them.

Official support

- Flaccus (Roman governor) himself took center stage, flogging leaders of the Jewish community and members of their senior council in a fashion normally reserved only for the criminal element among lowly Egyptians.
- He presided over executions staged in conjunction with theatrical performances and popular entertainment. Jewish homes were searched for weapons, thus to make a show of seeking evidence. But further executions followed on flimsy testimony, and even women were compelled to swallow swine's flesh or face the worst that torturers could conceive. The rampages included the burning and destruction of synagogues.

Jelousy of the Greeks?

- Alexandria, a hotbed of latent anti-Jewish hatred
- The antagonism between the Greek and Jews
- Greek anti-Jewish propagandists, who cooked up the plot to victimize Jews, hoodwinked Flaccus into serving as their front man

Interpretations

- Many interpret the hostility as arising out of Hellenic resentment and jealousy: Alexandrian Greeks found offensive the and status enjoyed by the Jews in their midst, thus fueling a fierce anti-Jewish hatred.
In a variant on this idea, the smoldering animosity directed itself not so much against the Jews as against the Romans, who had stripped Alexandria of its autonomy while according protection to the Jews. Since it was futile and dangerous to resist Rome, the Jews could be victimized as protégés of the imperial power.
- Others, by contrast, see *Roman* policy as victimizing the Jews, thus encouraging Greeks to assault the marginalized people.

Interpretations (cont.)

- The Greeks of Alexandria reacted harshly against Jewish efforts to advance or retain their constitutional and political station in the city, whether through citizenship or other civic privileges.
- Another view envisions a class struggle, in which the Alexandrian Greek proletariat struck out against the more successful and well-to-do Jewish population. The hostility of the Alexandrian mob stemmed from a combination of economic envy and religious hatred.⁶²

Common element

The different perspectives overlap and intersect, not in every instance inconsistent with one another. One element however, unites them all. The contest is visualized as one that pits Greeks against Jews. A bitter animosity or a heated struggle over privileges marked that stormy relationship. On such an analysis, the diaspora existence of Jews in Alexandria must have been anxiety-ridden, stressful, and fraught with danger.

Not the whole story

- None of this, of course, denies the existence of bigotry or animosity toward Jews in some circles of the Greek community. As is well known, Josephus felt the need to refute calumnies against the Jews conveyed by Alexandrian intellectuals like Apion, Chaeremon, and Lysimachus. And the fragments of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* contain a number of remarks hostile to Jews. Isidoros, Lampon, and Dionysios may well have been part of those circles and shared those sentiments. But the Hellenic component in the riots does not serve to define them. The cynical motives of the leaders tapped into a much more deeply-rooted embitterment that resided in the indigenous people of Egypt.

The pogrom as source of threat

- The evidence, ambiguous, complex, and frustratingly fragmentary, nevertheless converges on a central point. The Jews of Alexandria did not suffer oppression under Ptolemaic or Roman governance; they enjoyed freedom to perform traditional rites and to worship the divinity in their own way; and they possessed (unspecified) civic privileges in the larger community.
- The persecutions in 38 CE during the governorship of Flaccus came as a shocking interruption of their untroubled life, for special and peculiar reasons (as we have seen), not as the culmination of simmering Hellenic anti-Jewish attitude nor as resistance to Jewish grasping after Hellenic citizenship.
But the interruption and the shock set off alarm bells. Flaccus' actions entailed, a destruction of the Jewish political community.

Bitter legacy

- The situation took a dire and dramatic turn after. Repercussions from rebellion in Palestine extended to Egypt. In Alexandria, the citizenry met to vote an embassy to Rome, thus spreading alarm among the Jews. The Alexandrians' purpose, in all likelihood, was to disassociate themselves sharply from the Jewish population and to avoid the taint of disloyalty to Rome. Jews flocked into the assembly, prompting reprisals by the Greeks; there was a **rapid escalation of events that resulted in the slaughter of large numbers at the hands of Roman forces.** The volatile situation in the wake of the Palestinian upheaval overrode all other considerations. When rebellion burst out again, a half-century later in the era of Trajan, it emerged from the diaspora, and the bitter legacy helped to inspire Jewish assaults on their enemies in Alexandria.

The Egyptians

- One element is missing in almost all interpretations of these events: the Egyptians. Insofar as jealousy and animosity might be justified and intelligible, they are much more readily ascribable to Egyptians than to Greeks. Egyptians stood at the bottom of the social and political structure. Rights guaranteed to the Jews in a Hellenic community where Egyptians lacked any standing whatever would surely generate a bitterness that seethed just below the surface.

- The frightful and vicious assaults inflicted
- upon the Jews in 38, even if somewhat exaggerated by Philo, indicate
- a brutal outburst by people long oppressed and debased in their own
- land.⁶⁸ This was no mere rivalry between Jews and Greeks over civic prerogatives.
- The underclass of Alexandrian society, the ignominious Egyptians,
- here seized an opportunity to vent their passions.

Egyptian mobs

- Philo records attacks by the mob on Jewish synagogues and the installation of statues of the emperor into the sanctuaries. And he leaves no doubt about the composition of the mob: they were those who deified dogs, wolves, lions, crocodiles, and every manner of animal.

That does not apply to Greeks. Indeed, the people who, in Philo's presentation, were most zealous in flattering Gaius' pretensions to divinity were those who reckoned ibises, asps, and other beasts to be gods. It is noteworthy that the author can use the term "Alexandrians" here simply to refer to the Egyptians of Alexandria. Hence, when he identifies the chaotic and turbulent mob of Alexandrians who seized upon the opportunity presented by Gaius' attitude to reveal the hatred that had long been smoldering, he most logically points a finger at the Egyptians.

Jewish-Egyptian hostility

- The consistency with which Jewish writers, especially Alexandrian Jews, brand Egyptians as villains can hardly be coincidental. That supplies a critical element for understanding the atmosphere that permitted a pogrom.
Certain Greek malcontents may have set matters in motion, prodding Flaccus into actions that would discredit him and providing the outlet for pent-up passions among the populace to explode onto the scene.
- But the pent-up passions belonged primarily to Egyptians rather than to Greeks.