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# SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

YEARBOOK OF THE ISRAEL SOCIETY  
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prevalent notions. Since one should also be grateful for an edited volume under 400 pages, this criticism has, of course, its limits in terms of what we can expect from just one book.

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Samuele Rocca, *In the Shadow of the Caesars: Jewish Life in Roman Italy*. Leiden: Brill, 2022. XIII+345 pp., ISBN: 9789004517042.

The Jewish community of the city of Rome is one of the best attested Jewish diaspora communities. It is referenced by many ancient writers, including Cicero, Suetonius, Tacitus and, of course, Josephus, and the amazing Jewish catacombs discovered in the city provide abundant archaeological evidence for this society. Such a community, usually referred to as one of the greatest communities of antiquity, deserves a thorough examination of all the available data. The book at the heart of this review tries to do this while also examining the evidence for Jewish presence in the rest of Roman Italy. The book consists of seven articles and book chapters published in the past that have been adapted, updated and revised to fit within the book, as well as information that the author has not previously addressed.

The book starts, as is tradition, with an interesting introduction that presents the layout of the book and its logic while exploring the historiography of the subject, including whether ancient antisemitism existed. It is followed by the first chapter, which warrants special attention and nicely presents the early evidence for the Jewish community in the city of Rome. However, clear problems with Rocca's methodology, along with his unawareness of recent publications on several topics that he mentioned, are clear in his examination of the archaeological evidence. For example, on page 34 he is unaware that already in 1996, Speidel showed that the correct reading of Flavia Optata's funerary inscription does not indicate that her husband served in a Jewish unit.<sup>1</sup> This corrected reading was mentioned and recently embraced in several publications.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Rocca conducts a debate regarding the size of the Jewish community in the city, where he dismisses the figure of 4,000 Jews of military age being recruited in the city in 19 CE, appearing in both Josephus and Tacitus. He then suggests that the 8,000, who were mentioned as a welcoming party to receive the delegation to Augustus in *Jewish Antiquities*, are almost all of the Jewish population in the city. This is illogical, as most Jews had to work, and so could not have been part of the welcoming party. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that infants and small children would be taken for fear they would be crushed in the crowd. In addition, were most of the Jews even aware that the delegation arrived? And did they even care?

<sup>1</sup> M.P. Speidel (1996). 'Raising New Units for the Late Roman Army: "Auxilia Palatina",' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50, 164.

<sup>2</sup> Raúl González-Salinero (2022). *Military Service and the Integration of Jews into the Roman Empire*. Leiden: Brill, 153–60; W. Eck (2021). 'Die – fast – unsichtbare jüdische Diaspora im Westen des Imperium Romanum vor der Spätantike,' in M. White, J. Schröter, and V.M. Lepper (eds.), *Torah, Temple, Land*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 248–49; H. Olshanetsky (2018). 'The Jewish Soldiers of Titus and His Successors, the Roman Emperors,' *Hayo Haya* 12, 19–20; H. Olshanetsky (2021). 'In the Service of the Empire: Continuity of Jewish Military Service in the Armies of Rome,' *Sapiens Ubique Civis* 2, 148–49.

Rocca follows this by estimating that the Jewish population in the city at this period was most probably 10,000 people (p.40). In his low estimation, Rocca attributes significant weight to the Jewish catacombs from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE and onward, which enabled the burial of 8,000 individuals which, according to Rocca, supports a population size of 2,000 people (p.54–55). Surprisingly, he later provides a higher number of possible Jewish burials (17,818, on page 148). Furthermore, he does not take into account the limitations of archaeology, and the fact that only a small insignificant fraction of all burials from antiquity have been found, and usually of the elite, thus such a calculation cannot be reliable. Accordingly, and most importantly, the large catacombs support an estimation of a large community, and are not a reason to dismiss all the ancient textual records. The same goes for when Rocca assumes that if there are archaeological finds only from a certain period, this is the only time that there was a Jewish community in this place, when in reality it could be accidental that finds of that period were uncovered. This is true for the remains of many Jewish communities that may be lost forever, as well as for the discovery of archaeological finds of Jewish communities that do not exist in the surviving textual records.

Mistakes regarding archaeology continue with Rocca representing the Second Jewish revolt (the Bar Kochaba revolt) as ‘a war of extermination’ (p. 42). He based this claim on the skeletal remains that were found in the “Cave of Letters” and the “Cave of Horrors.” This is even though the Romans did not try to find and destroy all Jewish presence in the region, as skeletal remains were found in only 6 out of the 52 refuge caves used by Bar Kochaba’s followers in the last days of the war. This suggests that either those hiding were allowed to surrender, or that the Romans did not find most of them, and so indicated that Roman search operations were short and not a crucial goal,<sup>3</sup> and were certainly never meant to exterminate the entire population.

The second chapter, which is well composed, examines the legal status of the Jews, particularly in Italy, throughout Hellenistic-Roman antiquity to complete the picture and compare different examples. Here, he refers to considerations which were not mentioned in Chapter One: Jewish communities were actually composed of many congregations and groups, which possibly came from different sects and backgrounds. Conversely, the main problem is that he does not define what is a congregation or a community, and uses the terms intertwined for both the entire Jewish population in a place, and the groups composing it. The first half of this chapter can be defined as a debate whether the Jewish communities/congregations enjoyed similar rights to those given to different *collegia*, while the second half deals with the Jewish community’s leadership and Roman legislation regarding the Jews.

The third chapter deals with Jewish social life, a very broad topic also covering their interaction with non-Jews, and is part of Rocca’s attempt to explore the social rank and wealth of the Jews, and how far some members of the community were able to advance. It starts by exploring the onomasticon of Jewish names to see the influences the Jews absorbed from the surrounding groups. He later writes about a few famous families that were Jewish or had a Jewish connection. However, the relationship is not always evident or robust, and it is worth considering what might be learned from this, assuming such a connection even existed.

The fourth chapter explores a plethora of other topics, such as Jewish apologetical texts, the language used by the community, their relationship with the rabbis from Judea and their self-identity. Its main part explores the finds from the Jewish catacombs, and includes dozens of plans and coloured photos from the sites. However, while his analysis and debate regarding these finds

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<sup>3</sup> H. Eshel and B. Zissu (2015). *The Bar Kokhba Revolt: The Archaeological Evidence*. Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 72–73.

are excellent, its reference to a different one is problematic. On pages 209–12, he mentions that the owner of a gladiator helmet found in Pompeii was Jewish, since a seven-fronds palm tree with two clusters of dates appear on the helmet, and this discussion is similar to the article published by him in 2006.<sup>4</sup> In both, he disregards the fact that many nations, like the Phoenicians, used the palm tree as a symbol. More problematic is the lack of awareness that the palm frond was given to the victor in gladiatorial games. And so, palms became a symbol of victory in the arena, and thus appear on many gladiators' graves.<sup>59</sup>

The last chapter is very different and more general in nature, as it explores the Roman response to the First Jewish revolt, and the place of the revolt in Flavian imperial ideology. It surveys Josephus' writings and the way he portrays certain parts of the revolt through mainly focusing on the victory procession in Rome. The author also devotes a significant discussion to the procession in general, its artistic and literary representations and the Flavian buildings, erected to commemorate the war or funded by the spoils from this war. Lastly, Rocca considers the Flavian depiction of the war on coins and beyond. His main conclusion is that the Jews are not represented as barbarians, but rather as civilized people and that Jewish men are represented as masculine. This portrayal was also meant to glorify the Flavians as the victors that subdued a major nation.

To conclude, the book attempts to tackle a worthy topic, sometimes successfully, and at other times ineffectually. It does offer interesting discussions and information, although the book would benefit if the author updates and amends his discussions in a new edition. It also highlights how much new material on the topic has been uncovered or published, and that the book in its current form is far from being the last word on the topic.

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Louise Blanke and Jennifer Cromwell (eds.), *Monastic Economies in Late Antique Egypt and Palestine*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 396. ISBN 978-1-107-27897-3.

The book opens with a lengthy chapter (L. Blanke, J. Cromwell, 'The Monastic Economies in Late Antique Egypt and Palestine. Past, Present, and Future,' pp. 1–38) summarising the state of research on monasticism in late antiquity with particular reference to the economic aspects of monastic communities. The authors describe the emergence of the old myth, based on hagiographical sources, of 'holy men', monks dedicated to asceticism and meditation, living in seclusion and economic dependence on the rest of society—followed by a description of the decline of this myth through archaeological and papyrological research of at least the last twenty years. They summarise the main theses of the other twelve chapters—on the various forms of economic activity of monks and their active participation in the economic life of Egypt and Palestine. In doing so, they point to research

<sup>4</sup> S. Rocca (2006). 'A Jewish Gladiator in Pompeii', *Materia giudaica* 11, no. 1–2, 287–301.

<sup>5</sup> M. Carter (2006). 'Palms for the Gladiators: Martial, Spect. 31 (27 [29])', *Latomus* 65, no. 3, 650–58; M. Carter (2009). 'Accepi ramum: Gladiatorial Palms and the Chavagnes Gladiator Cup', *Latomus* 68, no. 2, 438–41; H. Olshanetsky (2023). 'Were There Jewish Gladiators? A Re-Evaluation of the Available Archaeological and Textual Evidence', *Atiqot* 111, 124–26; H. Olshanetsky (2021). 'Do We Really Have Archaeological Evidence for Jewish Gladiators?', *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology* 8, no. 3, 62–63.