

Septimius Severus and Cities in Samaria: Rewards and Punishments

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In 193-194 AD, after the initial successes of Septimius Severus in the war against Niger, some cities in the East revolted against the latter. In many instances this was due more to long-standing inter-city rivalries than to a conscious preference for a particular pretender: Nicomedia declared for Severus, so its rival for supremacy in Bithynia, Nicaea, opened its gates to Niger's fleeing soldiers; in Syria, with Antioch and Berytus supporting Niger, Laodicea and Tyre took the side of Severus. The latter cities paid dearly for their move: both were seized and devastated by Niger's forces.¹

After his final victory, Severus rewarded those cities which went over to his side and punished Niger's supporters. The scope of these measures as well as their precise circumstances are difficult to determine, since our information, which comes mainly from written sources, is very fragmentary. Thus, the SHA states that Severus deprived Neapolis in Samaria of its *ius civitatis*;² the source, however, provides no further details. There is no direct evidence about Neapolis in the years immediately following; relevant epigraphic evidence does not exist and the numismatic evidence is inconclusive.³ Comparison with the fate of other communities known to have been punished by Severus after the war is thus the only basis left for a historical reconstruction.

We know of two more cities deprived of their *ius civitatis* for loyalty to Niger, Antioch in Syria and Byzantium in Thrace were reduced to the position of *komai* and, together with their territories, came under control of

¹ Herodian 3.2.9 (Nicomedia, Nicaea); 3.3.3-5 (Syrian cities).

² SHA, *Severus* 9.5.

³ There are no coins of Neapolis from the time of Severus; those issued under Caracalla give its name as Aurelia Flavia Neapolis (*BMC Palestine*, pp. 58-9, nos. 84-6). However, neither fact allows for a definite interpretation. City coinage was sporadic by nature and intervals were a common occurrence; the name Aurelia could have been adopted under either reign.

the neighbouring cities Laodicea and Perinthus, respectively. For Laodicea and Perinthus this was part of the reward for supporting Severus in the civil war.⁴ Neither arrangement, however, lasted long; a few years later, during his second stay in the East, the emperor reversed his policy. Antioch was rehabilitated in 197/8 and Byzantium at approximately the same date.⁵ The main reason behind the move must have been practical. The arrangements were unnatural and disruptive; in order to normalize life in the provinces concerned they had to be cancelled. However, Severus also used this episode for propaganda purposes. After the defeat of Albinus, his last rival, the emperor was engaged in further promoting the dynastic claims of his sons. Caracalla, Caesar from 195/6, now became Augustus; a show of clemency towards previously penalized cities would have added to his popularity. The rehabilitation of both cities was accordingly advertised as having been due to intervention by Caracalla;⁶ it appears to be for this reason that Byzantium adopted the name Antonia (or Antoninia).⁷

The reconciliation seems to have involved other places as well. The city of Nicaea was punished after the war against Niger by losing its status as metropolis and the title 'first in the province'. However, an inscription in honour of Plautilla which gives the name of the city as Aureliana Antoniniana, indicates that Nicaea, too, was pardoned, and an intervention by Caracalla was alleged here as well.⁸ Given these examples, it looks more than likely that Neapolis was rehabilitated at about the same time as the rest. In fact, the SHA mentions Severus' reconciliation with the people of Palestine during his second stay in the area⁹ and, although it does not name specific places, there are no apparent reasons to suggest that Neapolis was an exception.¹⁰

Some further details of Severus' actions in Samaria may possibly be reconstructed as well. The punishment and rehabilitation of Neapolis would not have concerned this city alone. After being deprived of its *ius civitatis*

⁴ Herodian 3.6.9; Cassius Dio 75.14.3; Hesychius of Miletus in F. Jacoby, *FGrH* 390, F1(36); R. Ziegler, 'Antiochia, Laodicea und Sidon in der Politik der Severer', *Chiron* 8, 1978, 494-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 495-500.

⁶ SHA, *Caracalla* 1.7.

⁷ Hesychius of Miletus in F. Jacoby, *FGrH* 390, F1(37)-(38); Ziegler (note 4), 495.

⁸ L. Robert, 'La titulature de Nicée et de Nicomédie: la gloire et la haine', *HSCP* 81, 1977, 8-9, 19-28.

⁹ SHA, *Severus* 14.6.

¹⁰ E.M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, 1976, 490.

Neapolis could not have remained an administrative entity in its own right and must have been governed from somewhere else. If the cases of Antioch and Byzantium are a guide, it is likely that Neapolis was given, together with its territory, to a neighbouring city. The most obvious candidate would have been Sebaste, the nearest big urban centre in Samaria.

We have no direct evidence of the attitudes of Sebaste during the war of 193/4. However, the city became a colony sometime during Severus' reign. Ulpian mentions Severus' grant of colonial status to Sebaste, albeit without further comment,¹¹ and some coins of the city issued under this emperor identify it in Latin as COL L SEP SEBASTE.¹² Three other cities in the area were also made colonies by Severus — Heliopolis, Tyre and Laodicea. Heliopolis might have been a special case, since this city was part of a Roman colony previously.¹³ Tyre supported Severus in the war against Niger, but the precise circumstances of the grant are difficult to pinpoint. The case of Laodicea appears to be clearer.

Laodicea took the side of Severus in the civil war and was sacked by Niger's soldiers.¹⁴ Immediately after Severus' victory against Niger, Laodicea replaced Antioch as the metropolis and capital of the new province of Syria Coele. Antioch, reduced to the status of *kome*, became part of Laodicean territory.¹⁵ This happened in 194 AD,¹⁶ when Severus arrived in the region for the first time. On his second stay, in 197/8,¹⁷ he made Laodicea a colony. As has been shown recently, the rehabilitation of Antioch

¹¹ Dig. 50.15.1.7.

¹² *BMC Palestine*, p. 80, nos. 12-14.

¹³ When Berytus was founded as a colony c. 15 BC, Heliopolis was included in its territory. The arrangement lasted until the time of Severus, who made Heliopolis an independent colony. The precise circumstances of this change are not clear from the evidence at our disposal. Herodian (3.3.3) implies that Berytus supported Niger; according to Ulpian, Heliopolis became a colony as an outcome of the civil war (Dig. 50.15.1.2). It has been accordingly suggested that Heliopolis supported Severus (Smallwood [note 10], p. 487), and that since it earlier belonged to Berytus, its transformation into a separate colony constituted a punishment for Berytus (F. Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 1993, 124). If the connection between the initial punishment of Berytus and the colonial status of Heliopolis was straightforward, the change would have occurred as early as 194.

¹⁴ Herodian 3.3-5.

¹⁵ Herodian 3.6.9.

¹⁶ H. Seyrig, 'Antiquités Syriennes, 85. Un poids de Laodicée', *Syria* 40, 1963, 30-32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

and Laodicea's elevation to the rank of colony must have been simultaneous,¹⁸ so that the grant to Laodicea appears to have been made, at least in part, in order to compensate this city for the loss of the Antiochene territory and to guarantee its more privileged status as compared to Antioch.¹⁹ This means that when Ulpian states that Severus made Laodicea a colony for its services in the civil war,²⁰ he is giving us the final outcome of a process which actually took place in two stages: the initial reward in 194 and the compensation in 197/8.

It is possible to explain the elevation of Sebaste to the rank of colony along the same lines as that of Laodicea. Sebaste is likely to have supported Severus in the civil war.²¹ That Ulpian does not state this explicitly may not be a negative sign, since when it comes to the colonial status of Tyre, Ulpian does not mention this city's stand against Niger either.²² Sebaste could have received its reward in the form of control over the city of Neapolis and its territory in 194. If, as seems most likely, Severus gave its *ius civitatis* back to Neapolis during his second stay in the region, he would have had to find a way of compensating Sebaste, as well as keeping it superior in status to Neapolis.²³ He would accordingly have made Sebaste a colony.

¹⁸ Ziegler (note 4), 499-500.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Dig. 50.15.1.3.

²¹ Sebaste may have defected to the opposite side out of the same considerations as its counterparts elsewhere, i.e. out of rivalry with Neapolis (Smallwood [note 10], 488; Millar [note 13], 124). The 'Jewish and Samaritan revolt' mentioned by Orosius and Eusebius does not seem to bear on this division of allegiance between the two Samaritan cities (Smallwood, 488-9; *RE* II A, s.v. *Septimius Severus* [M. Fluss], col. 1959).

²² Dig. 50.15.1. pr.; F. Millar, 'The Roman *Coloniae* of the Near East: A Study of Cultural Relations', in H. Solin and M. Kajava (eds.), *Roman Eastern Policy and Other Studies in Roman History*, 1990, 34-5. We have no definite evidence on when Tyre became a colony. The last coins of the city with Greek legends belong to 195/6 (*BMC Phoenicia*, p. 264, nos. 328-9). The earliest colonial coins of Tyre mention the eleventh acclamation of Severus as emperor. This acclamation belongs to the first half of 198 and, therefore, allows for the bestowal as of this date (*BMC Phoenicia*, pp. CXXXVI, 269, nos. 367-8; Ziegler [note 4], 498-9; Millar [above], 35).

²³ A connection between the temporary punishment of Neapolis and the enhancement of its neighbour has been suggested by B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, 1990, 359-60.

The exact date of the grant to Sebaste is a matter of controversy. The city's last coin issues with Greek legends are dated CKS (226).²⁴ Josephus seems to put the foundation of Sebaste by Herod in the thirteenth year of the king's reign.²⁵ Two city eras of Sebaste may thus be proposed: 28 BC, counting from 40/39 BC (the first year of Herod's *de jure* rule) or 25 BC, if the reckoning is made from 37/6 BC (the first year of his *de facto* rule). According to the earlier era, the *terminus ab quo* for the grant would be 198/9; counting from the later era, it would be 201/2.

Although the *terminus* of 201/2 is the one most often cited,²⁶ it seems the less likely of the two. The beginning of the calendar year in Sebaste would normally fall in autumn. Thus, since at the beginning of the year 201/2 the city would still have minted coins with Greek legends, the decision about its status would not have been taken before 202. A passage in the SHA implies that Severus and Caracalla entered upon their joint consulship of 202 while still in Syria;²⁷ on the other hand, the emperor and his son are known to have been in Rome by summer of the same year.²⁸ Therefore, Severus is usually held to have left the region shortly after January 1, 202. According to the accepted chronology, the grant to Sebaste could therefore only have been made, at the earliest, during the last days of Severus' stay in the region.

Administrative measures by Severus in the Syro-Palestinian area, when they can be precisely dated, all appear to have been taken fairly soon after

²⁴ The series is fairly extensive. The obverses bear the portraits of Severus, Domna, Caracalla or Geta, while the reverses name the city in Greek as CEBACTH CYP: M. Rosenberger, *City-Coins of Palestine (The Rosenberger Israel Collection)*, III, 1977, pp. 56 (17), 57 (18-19), 58 (24-25); Y. Meshorer, *City-Coins of Eretz Israel and the Decapolis in the Roman Period*, 1985, nos. 116-17; idem, *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum, American Numismatic Society, Part 6: Palestine – South Arabia*, 1981, no. 1080.

²⁵ Josephus, *AJ* 15.8.5 (292-293, 296-298), 15.9.1 (299).

²⁶ Meshorer, *City-Coins* (note 24), p. 44; idem, *Sylloge* (note 24), nos. 1067-1084; Rosenberger (note 24), p. 54; D.C. Baramki, *The Coin Collection of the American University of Beirut Museum. Palestine and Phoenicia*, 1974, pp. 32-3. These authors have accepted the date of 25 BC for the foundation of Sebaste as proposed by G.F. Hill in *BMC Palestine*, XXXVIII-XXXIX. According to Hill, of the three possible dates — 27, 26 and 25 BC — the latest is to be preferred since 'Josephus implies that the city was founded in the thirteenth year of Herod (which began 1 Nissan, 25 BC) and the numismatic arguments to the contrary are untenable'.

²⁷ SHA, *Severus* 16.8.

²⁸ The marriage of Caracalla and Plautilla took place in Rome in summer 202 (*RE* II A2, s.v. *Septimius Severus* [M. Fluss], cols. 1974-5).

Severus' arrival on the spot. His first stay in Syria began in spring/summer 194: before the end of the calendar year of 193/4 Laodicea was made a metropolis and the province of Syria was divided into two, Syria Coele and Syria Phoenice.²⁹ Severus was in Syria again in autumn 197 and then in summer 198:³⁰ Laodicea became a colony before the end of the calendar year 197/8.³¹ The grant of city-status to the Palestinian towns Lydda (Diospolis) and Beth Govrin (Eleutheropolis) was made in 199/200 AD. Exactly when the emperor visited Palestine is a disputed matter,³² but there is little doubt that it happened in either 199 or 200.³³

The grant to Sebaste in 202 or later would therefore look exceptionally delayed. The *terminus ab quo* of 198/9, which allows the date of 198/9 or 199/200 for the elevation of the city to the rank of colony, is thus to be preferred to that of 201/2.³⁴ Since the grant to Sebaste and the emancipation of Neapolis would presumably have gone hand in hand, the years 198/9 or 199/200 would be the most likely time for Severus' rehabilitation of Neapolis.

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²⁹ Seyrig (note 16); H. Ingholt, 'Deux inscriptions bilingues de Palmyre', *Syria* 13, 1932, 283-4.

³⁰ Severus sailed to Syria directly in summer 197. He waged war against the Parthians during the winter of 197/8 and then returned to Syria (SHA, *Severus* 15.2-3; 16.1).

³¹ Seyrig (note 16).

³² J. Hasebroek, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Kaisers Septimius Severus*, 1921, 120; K. Hannestad, 'Septimius Severus in Egypt. A Contribution to the Chronology of the Years 198-202', *Classica et Medievalia* 6, 1944, 201, 208-9; T.D. Barnes, 'Emperors on the Move', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 2, 1989, 255.

³³ Literary sources imply that Severus traversed Palestine on his way to Egypt: Cassius Dio 76.13.1; SHA, *Severus* 17.1. Severus' presence in Egypt is firmly attested for the period from December 199 to April 200 (Hasebroek, previous note, 119). The milestones from Judaea associated with Severus' presence in the area belong to 198 and 199 (B. Isaac, 'Milestones in Judaea, from Vespasian to Constantine', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 110, 1978, 51-2).

³⁴ W. Kubitschek, *Zur Geschichte von Städten des römischen Kaiserreiches*, 1916, 9-10; Smallwood (note 10), 77 and note 55, 490 and note 14.