

Hellenistic *politeumata* and the Jews. A Reconsideration.

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Aryeh Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. The Struggle for Equal Rights*, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum; 7) Tübingen 1985 (XVIII+424 pages).

This book by Aryeh Kasher recounts anew the socio-political history of the Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt from the time of Alexander the Great to the Jewish revolt under Trajan. Thus in the period covered and in the scope of the sources considered, his work parallels the well-known studies by Victor Tcherikover.¹ Yet Kasher views his predecessor with little approval. In his opinion Tcherikover, carried away by the model of the Jewish struggle for emancipation in 18th-19th century Europe, distorted the basic aspirations of the Hellenistic Jews when he presented acceptance into the body of citizenry in the Greek *poleis* as their ultimate aim. Against this anachronistic approach, Kasher propounds a concept of his own: the Jews in Egypt, and actually all over the Hellenistic Diaspora, rejecting integration in Greek civic bodies, chose instead to fight for equal rights for their own "independent political units", the *politeumata*.

The idea that Jews in Egypt were organized in more or less autonomous *politeumata* was developed earlier by numerous scholars, including Tcherikover himself.² The weight of Kasher's argument is in fact directed against the

1 Notably *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, translated by S. Applebaum (Philadelphia 1959), and *The Jews of Egypt in the Hellenistic-Roman Age in the Light of the Papyri*² (Jerusalem 1963) (in Hebrew).

2 V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization* 296–305. Works developing this concept are mostly listed by Kasher, though the study by C. Préaux, 'Les étrangers à

common assumption that this form of communal organization was considerably inferior in status to the Greek *polis*. In asserting the self-sufficient character of the *politeumata*, Kasher invests them with a citizenship of their own, equal or almost equal — this distinction is often blurred in the different chapters of the book — to that of the *poleis*. Moreover, in addition to the *politeuma* in Alexandria on which his predecessors focused most of their attention, Kasher discovers numerous Jewish *politeumata* in the Egyptian *chora* and even as far away as Caesarea in Palestine and Antioch in Syria, all endowed with sufficient rights and status as to all but extinguish the attraction of citizenship in the surrounding gentile cities for their members-*politai*.

Kasher's work epitomizes the tendency, especially evident in more recent research, to consider the *politeuma* as the cornerstone of Jewish community life in the Hellenistic Diaspora.³ Thus, like any attempt at a systematic exposition of a theory, it also highlights flaws which could otherwise have remained unnoticed, and provides yet another stimulus for a new look at the subject.

And indeed, the reader cannot fail to observe that Kasher's *politeumata* prove to have been surprisingly secretive. Those located in the *chora* did not disclose their true character in any single express reference — one would search in vain for a mention of a *politeuma* in any of the documents collected in the *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*. Even more astounding is the reticence on the part of Philo and Josephus Flavius. In two long chapters Kasher strives to demonstrate that both writers' aim was to prove to the Roman authorities that the Jewish *politeuma* in Alexandria was equal in rights to the Greek *politeuma* (or association of *politeumata*) in the city. Nevertheless, neither of them ever mentions "the *politeuma*" for the rights of which they assumedly struggled! The Alexandrian anti-Semites joined this conspiracy of silence. Since the autonomy and independence of the Alexandrian Jews from the *polis* were supposedly secured by their affiliation to the *politeuma*, the anti-Semites, according to Kasher, fought for its abolition — again, without ever mention-

l'époque hellénistique (Egypte-Delos-Rhodes),' *L'étranger* (pr. partie), *Recueils de la Société Jean-Bodin* (Brussels 1958) 141–193, which, in the part dealing with Jews in Egypt (pp. 158–175), anticipates some of his ideas, seems to have escaped his attention.

3 See, e.g., S. Applebaum in S. Safrai, M. Stern (eds.) *The Jewish People in the First Century*, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, Section One, vol. I (Assen 1974) 473; C. Alberro, *The Alexandrian Jews during the Ptolemaic Period* (Ph.D. Thesis, Michigan State University 1976); E.M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule* (Leiden 1976) esp. p.225.

ing the hated Jewish organization in their polemical literature. The only Jewish source originating in Egypt to mention a certain *politeuma* is the *Letter of Aristeas*. Corrected in different ways or subjected to far-fetched interpretations, the passage in question has traditionally been interpreted as a reference to the Jewish *politeuma* of Alexandria. We will offer below an alternative solution in an entirely different direction; yet however interpreted, this admittedly problematic text can hardly have much value as evidence. In short, when checking the sources, we find no sound reference to a single Jewish *politeuma* in all of Egypt, to say nothing of Caesarea and Antioch.

To compensate for the inadequacy of the direct evidence, Kasher introduces a number of assumptions which enable him to interpret dedicatory inscriptions of synagogues, our only evidence on many Jewish communities in the *chora*, as proof of their legal status. His two main considerations are the following: “a) Since unauthorized building of a synagogue is hardly credible (in particular in a country like Egypt) the legal basis for its construction and operation must have been the right ‘to live according to ancestral laws.’” “f) As the existence of most of the synagogues was revealed by dedicatory inscriptions ..., evidently the Jewish community involved was empowered to make decisions of an official nature and implement them, an indication that the decisions derived from a legal right and a body having a legal status.”

“It seems thus evident,” he concludes, “that a Jewish congregation that had a synagogue was organized as a community and was a legal entity recognized and defined by law (pp. 106–107).” In the subsequent discussion, the author has little difficulty in converting most of these “legal entities” into *politeumata* and in endowing them with all the rights allegedly possessed by every *politeuma*, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, as an independent political unit.

However, this *a priori* reasoning, whatever “country like Egypt” may have inspired it, creates a linkage between the freedom of worship and the legal status of the worshippers which never existed in Ptolemaic Egypt itself. As to the dedications of synagogues — or temples etc. — to the rulers, no religious community or association, however organized, and in fact no individual, was denied the right to adopt such “decisions of an official nature”. Yet these and other objections of detail can all be reduced to one main issue. Let us imagine that better evidence was found and that all the Jewish communities in *chora* and in cities were shown to have been organized as *politeumata*; what would that imply as to their legal and political status? To answer this question, the concept of *politeuma* adopted by Kasher must be confronted with the evidence available on actually attested *politeumata*. A reconsideration of this group of sources is all the more desirable since Kasher himself treated them in

a rather cursory manner, taking virtually for granted his most essential premise: that a certain form of association, the *politeuma*, could secure to a community of aliens rights equal (*isopoliteia*) to those of a *polis*.

II

The word *politeuma*, basically “a political action”, hence “form of government” or “constitution”, had a very wide range of meanings. In the Hellenistic period it was applied to a body of citizenry or a state, never an oriental monarchy but a city-state or a comparable constitutional state formation, like Rome or Carthage.⁴ It was apparently only in the Ptolemaic realm that *politeuma* came to mean a certain type of association, mostly of aliens settled in a foreign country. Misled by the word’s other uses, scholars did not hesitate to interpret these *politeumata* as political formations. And yet this view finds no support in the sources. It turns out that the *politeumata*-associations were not at all “political”.

A series of inscriptions from the necropolis of Sidon which may be dated as early as the end of the third century BCE give what seems to be the term’s earliest attestation in the sense of an association. Three better preserved texts mention the *politeumata* of citizens of Caunos in Caria, Termessos Minor in Pisidia and Pinara in Lycia; the fourth inscription which apparently mentions another *politeuma* is very fragmentary. The contents of the epitaphs as well as the painting of the burial monuments make it clear that they were commissioned by soldiers for their fellow-soldiers, who all belonged, if we accept the early dating, to the Ptolemaic army.⁵ The Sidonian *politeumata* appear as burial associations established by soldiers coming from the same city in order

- 4 See W. Ruppel, ‘Politeuma — Bedeutungsgeschichte eines staatsrechtlichen Terminus,’ *Philologus* 82 (1927) 268–312, 433–454; cf. M. A. Levi, ‘I *politeumata* e la evoluzione della società ellenica nel IV sec. A.C.,’ *PP* 92 (1963), p.321ff, reprinted in *Quattro studi spartani e altri scritti di storia greca* (Milan-Varese 1967) 191–210 (I am most grateful to Prof. D. Asheri who drew my attention to this study). Levi refers in passing to the later phenomenon of “*politeumata* ridotti a semplici associazioni libere (p. 209)” which we purpose to study below.
- 5 Th. Macridy-Bey, ‘A travers les nécropoles sidoniennes,’ *RBi* 13 (1904) 347–356; cf. P. Perdrizet, ‘Syriaca,’ *RA*, January-June 1904, 234–244, and L. Jalabert, ‘Nouvelles stèles peintes de Sidon,’ *ibid.*, July-December 1904, 1–16.

to pay their fellow-citizens (τοὺς αὐτῶν πολίτας) their last honors.⁶ We may assume that they had social and cult functions as well, yet these *Landsmannschaften*, known only from the inscriptions cited, must have been rather small, and there is no justification whatsoever for attributing to them any role in the political life of Sidon.

A short inscription from about the same period, this time from the Fayum in Egypt, commemorates the donation of a gate-house to “Zeus, Athene and the *politeuma* of Cilicians” by a high ranking officer, Arrenides of Syrbenda.⁷

The next piece of evidence, from the middle of the second century BCE, concerns a *politeuma* in the city Xoïs in Lower Egypt. The local *strategos* Kaphisodoros dedicated a temple “to Zeus Basileus and the other ancestral gods” in the name of the ruling consorts Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra II. This high official, who proudly stressed his Boeotian origin, turns out to have been also “the priest of the *politeuma*,” the members of which were no doubt “the Boeotians gathered in Xoïs” mentioned in the inscription as co-founders of the temple together with certain συμπολιτευόμενοι.⁸ It is quite probable that these “Boeotians gathered in Xoïs” were military settlers under Kaphisodoros’ command;⁹ the συμπολιτευόμενοι may have been their civil compatriots or other Greeks who joined the worship of Boeotian “ancestral gods” without being members of the *politeuma*.

A somewhat later inscription set up by a gathering (συναγωγή) of Idu-maeans in Memphis reveals similar organizational patterns. It contains a

6 Contrary to ethnic *politeumata* which we will encounter in Egypt, each of the Sidonian associations was established by soldiers from one single *polis*, and in calling the deceased τοὺς αὐτῶν πολίτας or τὸν αὐτῶν πολίτην the surviving members were evidently referring to their common citizenship of the city of origin; see M. Launey, *Recherches sur les armées hellénistiques* 2 (Paris 1950) 1081–1084. Kasher, without considering this interpretation, takes the epigraph’s wording for an indication that *polites* was the “legal and political” status of a member of any *politeuma* (p. 30) and does not hesitate to apply his conclusion to the situation in Alexandria; but see p. 184 below.

7 *SB* 4. 7270; now in E. Bernard, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques du Fayoum I* (Leiden 1975), no. 15.

8 *SB* 2. 6664. For the use of the term συμπολιτευόμενοι as a designation for the “associated members” of several ethnic *koina* established at the same period by the Ptolemaic soldiers on Crete, see Launey, *op.cit.* (supra, n. 6), 1032–1035; cf. E. Van’t Dack, ‘Notice au sujet de *SB* I 1106,’ *Atti del 17 Cong. Int. di Papirologia* (Naples 1984), 1325–1333.

9 As argued by Launey, *ibid.*, 1066–1067.

psephisma τοῦ πολιτεύματος καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς πόλεως Ἰδουμαίων bestowing numerous honours upon Dorion, the local *strategos*, who undertook certain repairs to the temple of Apollo (-Kos) at his own expense; the gathering which took place in the temple itself also confirmed Dorion in the honours bestowed upon him for his entire life.¹⁰ The latter part of the decision evidently refers to the title “the priest of the body (πλήθος) of the sword-bearers”, the only honorific title attached to Dorion’s name at the beginning of the *psephisma*. Since only the body which bestowed the title could confirm it, the sword-bearers must have participated in the gathering. We know, indeed, from another Idumaeian inscription from Memphis that the *makhairophoroi* were part of the Idumaeian unit stationed there.¹¹ It would then be plausible to identify this unit with the Idumaeian *politeuma* while considering “the Idumaeians from the city” their civil coreligionists. Likewise, an inscription from Hermupolis Magna presents the founders of the local temple dedicated to Idumaeian deities as οἱ παρ[ε]φεδρεύοντες ἐν Ἐρμοῦ πόλει ξένοι Ἀπολλῶ [νιασταί], that is the newly stationed Idumaeian garrison of the city, and οἱ συνπολιτευόμενοι [κ]τίσται who can be only the Idumaeians who did not belong to the military unit.¹²

A *politeuma* of Cretans is mentioned in an official exchange of letters of 145 BCE from the Fayum concerning Asclepiades, son of Ptolemaios, a Macedonian. Asclepiades, an *ephodos*, belonged to a body of 500 men “allied” or “attached” (ἐπικεχωρημένῳ[ν]) to the *politeuma* of Cretans. With his promotion to the cavalry, which occasioned the exchange of letters, two elected officials of the *politeuma* were apparently required to certify the extent of Asclepiades’ landed holding and to provide some personal data on the man.¹³

10 OGIS 737 = SB 5.8929; and see U. Rapaport, ‘Les iduméens en Egypte,’ *RPh* 43 (1969) 73–82; D. Thompson-Crawford, ‘The Idumaeans of Memphis and the Ptolemaic *Politeumata*,’ in *Atti* (see n. 8), 1069–1075.

11 SB 1.681.

12 Fr. Zucker, *Doppelschrift spätptolemäischer Zeit aus der Garnison von Hermupolis Magna* (Berlin 1938) (also in *Abh. der preussischen Ak. der Wiss.* 1937, Phil.-hist. Klasse Nr. 6) with some additions in *Aegyptus* 18 (1938), 279–284; Rapaport, *op. cit.* (supra, n. 10) proposes the restitution Ἀπολλῶ[νιασταί]. The worship in Idumaeian temples was not only according to “the ancestral custom” but also in their “foreign” language (*P. Giss.* 99, published anew by Zucker, *ibid.*, p. 13); this fact makes the association of non-Idumaeians in the Idumaeian temple communities most improbable and hardly leaves place to doubt the Idumaeian character of the *politeuma* of Memphis.

13 L. Mitteis and U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyrskunde* (Leipzig-Berlin 1912), vol. I, part 2, no. 448.

The bad state of preservation of Asclepiades' dossier makes the exact understanding of certain details impossible and explains the initial misinterpretation which gave rise to the theory of so-called "pseudo-ethnic *politeumata*" which never existed in reality.¹⁴ There is no reason to doubt the Cretan character of the *politeuma* even though its officials were put to use by the state keeping record of the military settlers of non-Cretan origin. This occurrence is the only instance of a *politeuma* functioning in any official capacity.

In the cases considered, what united the members of the *politeumata* was their common origin, hence their common worship. It is well known, however, that towards the end of the Ptolemaic rule the ethnic composition of army units became mixed. One of the latest *politeumata* from the period before the Roman conquest seems to reflect this process of assimilation. An inscription dated by its editor to the late second or the early first century BCE records a dedication by "a *politeuma* of soldiers serving in Alexandria" to Zeus Soter and Hera Teleia, two deities of universal appeal who could unite soldiers of different origin in their worship.¹⁵ This *politeuma* was headed by a *prostates* and a *grammateus*, a pair of elected officials most commonly found at the head of all kinds of associations. In the later period, we will see them again at the head of a *politeuma*.

The evidence surveyed presents a typical Ptolemaic *politeuma* as a cult association most commonly following the particular ancestral rite of its members, or just united on a "professional" basis, as in the case of Alexandrian soldiers. There is nothing to indicate that *politeumata* enjoyed any official status, no evidence that they were established by a royal "charter" or with royal approval, or that they possessed any judicial authority over their members or secured them any privileges; in short, no evidence that their status

- 14 J. Lesquier, *Les institutions militaires de l'Égypte sous les Lagides* (Paris 1911) 142–155; none of the arguments adduced by Lesquier in support of this theory can be considered valid after Launey, *op. cit.* (supra, n. 6), 1064–1066, 1068–1072. In this connection, we wonder what caused N. Lewis, *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt* (Oxford 1986) p. 89, to affirm that a certain Dryton son of Pamphilos "belonged to the *politeuma* of Cretans, to which he could have been assigned merely as a matter of administrative convenience." Dryton is indeed designated as Cretan, yet there is no apparent reason to doubt his Cretan origin, and besides, we know no document which would indicate Dryton's membership in any *politeuma*. The same queries are valid in regard to the alleged membership of Ptolemaios, Dryton's father-in-law, in the *politeuma* of Cyrenaecans (*ibid.* p. 93).
- 15 P. Fraser, 'Inscriptions from Ptolemaic Egypt,' *Berytus* 13 (1960), esp. 147–152, no. 11 (*SB* 8. 9812).

was preferential in any respect to that of other voluntary associations so widespread in Ptolemaic Egypt. And indeed, in the ordinance of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II ordering the confiscation of properties of different kinds of associations, *politeumata* appear side by side with *synodoi*.¹⁶ In the inscriptions from Memphis cited above, the worshippers of Apollo-Kos appear at one time as *politeuma* and at another as a “*koinon* of founders”, apparently of the same temple; in Hermupolis Magna the Idumaeans did not pretend to be more than *xenoi*. Yet whatever the name of the association, its members were entitled to maintain their worship according to the ancestral law, and to adopt and to publish their decisions, as did other *politeumata*, *koina*, *synodoi* etc. In Ptolemaic Egypt the name neither constituted a privilege, nor did it require any special authorization.

The Roman conquest of Egypt brought to a halt the recruitment of Ptolemaic military settlers and by consequence the *politeumata*'s link with the army; otherwise their structural and organizational patterns seem to have persisted. Curiously enough, *politeumata* were even “exported” to Italy. According to an inscription of 3 BCE from the temple of Zeus in Pompeii a certain Gaius Julius Hephastion, upon being appointed a priest of the *politeuma* of Phrygians, donated a statue of Phrygian Zeus to his flock. The fact that the inscription is dated according to the Egyptian system leaves no doubt as to the origin of the Phrygian *politeuma* in Pompeii.¹⁷ In 93 CE, the temple of a *politeuma* dedicated to (Isis-) Sachypsis was rebuilt under Abdon the *prostates* and Protarchos “who wrote,” that is the *grammateus*.¹⁸ And finally, in 120 CE, the officials of the Idiologos had to settle a conflict between the *politeuma* of Lycians and the *komogrammateus* of one of the villages in the nome of Mareotis, to the west of Alexandria. The *politeuma* — most probably situated in the same village — apparently regained the custody of some burial monuments.¹⁹ The parallels with the Ptolemaic *politeumata* are only too evident. Honorary priests make donations to their *politeumata*; the same officeholders head the soldiers' *politeuma* in Alexandria and that dedicated to (Isis-) Sachypsis in Theadelphia, both associations being devoid of any ethnic identity. On the other hand, as late as 120 CE we still find a *politeuma* established on a patently ethnic basis.

16 M.-Th. Lenger, *Corpus des Ordonnances des Ptolémées*² (*Académie Royale de Belgique, Mémoires de la classe des lettres*, 2e série, t.64, fasc.2), Brussels 1980, no. 50, ll.17 and 22.

17 *SB* 5.7875.

18 *SB* 1.5793; now in E. Bernand, *op.cit.* (n. 7 above) 2, no. 121.

19 *SB* 5. 8757.

The Jewish *politeuma* of Berenice in Roman Cyrenaica, the only Jewish *politeuma* attested to in the entire Hellenistic Diaspora, belongs to the same period and to the same type of associations. The two inscriptions it erected in honour of a certain Roman official and of one of its own members, apparently under Augustus and Tiberius, are first and foremost remarkable for the degree of Hellenization they display. The *politeuma* adopts its decisions by democratic vote, each member casting a black or white stone according to the Greek custom, and there is little Jewish in the honours it accords. Its *psephismata* are formulated in perfect accord with the protocol of civic decrees (under magistrates so-and-so, ἔδοξε τοῖς ἄρχουσι καὶ τῷ πολιτεύματι etc.), and were displayed in the municipal amphitheatre. The choice of the amphitheatre for their publication is all the more natural since the first *psephisma* honours the Roman official for his favours not only to the members of the *politeuma* but also to all the city-dwellers, while the second commemorates the repairs undertaken by a member on behalf of the entire *politeuma* in the amphitheatre itself.²⁰ These Hellenic tendencies and customs were not necessarily shared by the entire Jewish community of the city, “the gathering (*synagoge*) of the Jews of Berenice,” known from an inscription it erected in honour of those who funded the repairs of its house of prayer (*synagoge*).²¹ The members of the *politeuma* seem to have been among the donors,²² being, like all the local Jews, a part of the community. And all the same, though “gathering” with others, they maintained a particular organizational framework of their own.

The recurrent dichotomy between *politeuma* and the *synagoge* (Memphis, Berenice) or the *sympoliteuomenoi* (Xois) is quite instructive. Hellenistic voluntary associations were formally democratic: officials were elected, decisions were voted, every member was expected to bear in turn the liturgies, etc. And although wealthy and influential adherents were always welcome as

- 20 Recently published anew by J. Reynolds in *Excavations at Sidi Khrebish Benghazi (Berenice)*, Supplement to *Libya Antiqua* 5 (1978), vol. I, 244–247, no. 17 and 18. The reasons once adduced for considering the amphitheatre a particular community building were shown by the editor to be no longer binding in view of more recent archeological findings.
- 21 Reynolds, *ibid.*, 242–244, no. 16. G. Lüderitz, *Corpus jüdischer Zeugnisse aus der Cyrenaika* (Wiesbaden 1983) 148–158, reprints the three inscriptions (no. 70–72).
- 22 The archontes who head the list of the donors may be the magistrates of the *politeuma*; see S. Applebaum, *Jews and Greeks in Ancient Cyrene* (Leiden 1979) 160–167. Our exposition makes clear though that we do not share some of the author’s opinions.

potential benefactors, this system assumed some basic equality between the members. In the case of ethnic *politeumata*, the non-members could participate in common worship together with the members; yet since an ethnic community, insofar as it exceeded the limits of an army unit, could rarely be socially homogenous, *politeumata* remained clubs open only to those who could — and wished to — join this ceremonial of democracy. And ceremonial as they were, these and other voluntary associations, by adopting democratic practices so conspicuously absent from the surrounding political reality, show themselves heirs to the still glimmering Greek civic tradition. No wonder that Jews, who came from an entirely different cultural background, displayed little inclination to adopt such forms of association, and that only the most Hellenized among them chose to imitate their Greek neighbours.

This peculiar phenomenon of the Hellenistic mentality explains why the “staatrechtliche Termin” *politeuma* was applied to private associations, which only by the force of imagination of certain scholars were transformed into autonomous civic bodies. It would require a separate study to trace the origins of this *politeuma* of the historiographic legend. One of its main sources, however, is the romantic view of the aims and deeds of Alexander the Great which found its fullest expression in the works of W. W. Tarn. According to this concept, it was Alexander who established the *politeumata* of aliens in the cities he founded for “it cannot be supposed that his ultimate aim was an Empire divided up into city states; for, as the new towns were designed to promote the fusion of Europe and Asia on a basis of Greek culture, they were probably not autonomous Greek cities but a new mixed type”.²³ In these hypothetical cities “designed to accommodate people of more than one race”, the equilibrium between the Greek *politeuma* and the independent “*politeumata*” of other nations was to serve the ideal of *homonoia* and equity between Alexander’s Eastern and Western subjects. However, closer scrutiny showed this ideal was Tarn’s rather than Alexander’s,²⁴ and in any case, no conceptual considerations can substitute for the missing evidence.²⁵

23 W. W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great*, (Cambridge 1951) vol. I, 134–136; cf. W. W. Tarn and G. T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilization* (London 1952) 147–148. It is only fair to mention, however, that Tarn’s concept of *politeuma* was essentially anticipated by M. Engers, ‘*Politeuma*,’ *Mnemosyne* (N.S.) 54 (1926) 154–161, and many others.

24 G. Badian, ‘Alexander the Great and the Unity of Mankind,’ *Historia* 7 (1958) 425–444.

25 In a sub-chapter entitled ‘The Political Organization of Alexandria (according to Tarn),’ Kasher ventures to furnish the missing evidence. Here are a few of the

III

The famous Jewish *politeuma* of Alexandria — the main if not the only example cited by Tarn and others in support of their concept — is in fact an offshoot of the same historiographic legend. The only alleged mention of it is in the passage of the *Letter of Aristeas* which describes the public reading of the Greek translation of the Pentateuch, the excitement it stirred up in the Jewish community of Alexandria, and the subsequent prohibition against altering its text pronounced by οἱ ἱερεῖς καὶ τῶν ἑρμηνέων οἱ πρεσβύτεροι καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τοῦ πολιτεύματος οἱ τε ἡγούμενοι τοῦ πλήθους.²⁶ The *plethos* and its leaders are mentioned earlier in the same passage when Demetrios, the royal librarian, convokes the entire πλῆθος τῶν Ἰουδαίων, who praise the translation and beg Demetrios to provide a copy to their leaders (τοῖς ἡγουμένοις αὐτῶν). It is thus evident that the *plethos* stands for the Jewish

examples he collects to illustrate Tarn's thesis that "Hellenistic cities... tended to contain a number of *politeumata*" (pp. 181–185):

a) The *politeumata* on Delos: "After the rebellion of slaves in Delos in 130 BCE, a federation of several *politeumata* was established on the ruins of the city, the *politeumata* having been organized by foreign merchants subject to an Athenian government." Kasher's authorities are W.S. Ferguson, *Hellenistic Athens* (London 1911) and Tarn himself. However, neither Ferguson nor the relevant sources mention any *politeumata* on Delos; created, rather as a hypothesis, by Tarn, only in Kasher's exposition do they become an established fact.

b) The existence of a Syrian *politeuma* in Seleucia on the Tigris is deduced from Josephus' statement ἔστι δὲ καὶ Σύρων οὐκ ὀλίγον τὸ ἐμπολιτευόμενον *Ant.* 18. 372. Kasher's reasoning: "the word τὸ ἐμπολιτευόμενον is derived from *politeuma* rather than *polis*."

c) In an attempt to prove that Ptolemaic Alexandria was composed of ethnic *politeumata*, Kasher changes the date of the Lycian *politeuma* (see p. 174 above) from 120 CE to 120 BCE and locates it in Alexandria, without explaining either the mention of a Roman emperor at such an early date or the role of the village scribe in the city (p. 180). Moreover, he transfers the Phrygian *politeuma* from Pompeii to Alexandria (p. 180), and likewise the Boeotian *politeuma* from Xoïs (p. 35, n. 26); having thus prepared the ground, he proposes to consider the *politeuma* of soldiers stationed in Alexandria which has no ethnic identification (see p. 177 above) "as a federation of small *politeumata* of the ethnic type noted." The examples discussed — and their number could have been multiplied — are sufficient to demonstrate that Kasher's arguments by no means lend Tarn's concept greater solidity.

26 *Lettre d'Aristée à Philocrate*, ed. A. Pelletier (Paris 1962) (*Sources chrétiennes* 89), § 310.

community of Alexandria and is approached by the authorities as such; any attempt to switch the role of the “officially recognized” community to the *politeuma* contradicts the text too blatantly to merit any consideration. Who then are these “elders from the *politeuma*” related so closely by the author to the translators? Their identification with “the leaders of the *plethos*” — in which case the *plethos* and the *politeuma* must be identical²⁷ — requires, in fact, a correction to the text and is not convincing. Most commentators recognize, therefore, the distinction between the *plethos* and the *politeuma*, yet have considerable difficulty in defining the position of the latter. “Official recognition” aside, it could still be some separate organization of the community’s upper class.²⁸ There was probably nothing to prevent any group of Alexandrian Jews from establishing a *politeuma* to their liking; its private character would explain why no writer concerned with the fate and status of the Jewish community as a whole ever mentioned the *politeuma* before or afterwards. But in the specific context of the *Letter of Aristeas* this solution appears strained. If indeed this peculiar association — we know of no other *politeuma* led by “elders” — deserved mention, why did pseudo-Aristeas choose such an awkward way to introduce it? And another question: why are “the elders from the *politeuma*” so closely related to the elders of the translators?

The logic of the passage becomes clear if we try to understand the mention of the *politeuma* in it in the context of the entire *Letter*. Pseudo-Aristeas’ concept of Palestine, the idealized country the translators came from, pro-

27 See V. Tcherikover, in the introduction to *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (Jerusalem — Cambridge, Mass. 1957) vol. I, p.9.

28 Curiously enough, in his discussion of the passage (pp. 208–211), Kasher supports the view “that the *politeuma* was a limited group of privileged people within the broad Jewish ‘congregation’ (*plethos*).” If we are to apply this definition systematically, the subject matter of his book must be redefined as “The Struggle of Limited Groups of Privileged Jews for Equal Rights”, which is also of course quite legitimate. However, the passage cited is the only one where such a “limited” view of the *politeuma* is propagated; elsewhere in the book the term *politeuma* stands for the entire Jewish community: “Like other ethnic groups, the Jews of Egypt too enjoyed, as much as circumstances permitted, the great privilege of maintaining community life within the framework of military and administrative service. In Ptolemaic terms a community of that kind was called a *politeuma*, that is, a national (or religious) group enjoying certain political privileges... (p. 4).”

vides the necessary clue. In his heavily Hellenized description, Jerusalem turns into a perfectly situated *polis* surrounded by abundant *chora*; the High Priest Eleazar, whose rule is grounded on the general respect he commands, convokes the “citizens” (*politai*) on all important occasions. The divine law is the perfect constitution of the country; those who live according to it are described as τῶν κατ’ αὐτὰ πεπολιτευμένων καὶ πολιτευομένων ἀνδρῶν.²⁹ This terminology, which is not without parallels in the Hellenistic Jewish literature, explains the choice of the term *politeuma*, in its most common meaning of a city-state-like, constitutional state formation, for the designation of Eleazar’s Palestine. This interpretation makes the composition of the body which approved the Greek Pentateuch perfectly understandable. It consisted first and foremost of people who knew Hebrew and could testify therefore to the translation’s irreproachable conformity with the original. Those are “the priests as well as the elders of the translators and of those who came from the(ir) country.” We first discover that the translators were accompanied by a group of priests when the elder among these priests is called to arrange the prayer at the king’s banquet.³⁰ The other members of the escort are barely mentioned up to this point, yet it hardly needs saying that people of the stature of the translators chosen by Eleazar did not travel to Alexandria alone.³¹ Finally, to make the text more binding for the Alexandrian commun-

29 § 31; the use of terms like *polis* and *politai* can be traced by the index of Pelletier. On the Hellenistic-utopian elements in pseudo-Aristeas’ description of Palestine, cf. M. Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates* (New-York 1951) 48–50.

30 § 184. D. Schwartz, ‘The Priests in *Ep. Arist.* 310,’ *JBL* 97 (1978) 567–571, asserts, without adducing any proof, that the priests in our passage are the priests of the Jewish community of Alexandria. This is all the more strange since he himself admits that Alexandrian priests are mentioned in § 53 only to demonstrate their ignorance of the Tora prescriptions. Should one believe then, that pseudo-Aristeas made the same priests approve the translation to the Pentateuch? Besides, the wording of the passage is quite unequivocal: the king orders to arrange the feast according to the custom of πάντες οἱ παραγινόμενοι πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰουδαίας; it is among his guests from Judaea that he chooses the elderly priest Elisha to conduct the prayer (τῶν δὲ παραγενομένων σὺν ἡμῖν Ἐλισσαῖον, ὄντα τῶν ἱερέων πρεσβύτερον, παρεκάλεσε ποιήσασθαι κατευχήν). The particles derived from the verb παραγίγνεσθαι clearly denote in both cases people who arrived with Aristeas from Judaea.

31 In § 172 Eleazar sends the translators of Alexandria μετὰ ἀσφαλείας πολλῆς translated by Pelletier “avec une nombreuse escorte” (and see his note *ad loc.* on the meaning of ἀσφάλεια).

ity (*plethos*), it was also canonized by its leaders. As to the “Jewish *politeuma* of Alexandria”, we believe that this nonentity must be definitively abandoned.

Politeumata that did not exist could accord, of course, no citizenship; not even the existent ones could do so. Yet we do not have to rely on our findings to refute Kasher’s much emphasized assertion that the frequent references to Jews as *politai* of Alexandria in Philo and Josephus allude to their citizenship in their own *politeuma*, “which according to its organization and rights was an independent body.” “Henceforth,” he concludes, “the Jews of Alexandria will be termed ‘Jewish’ *politai* (οἱ πολῖται Ἰουδαῖοι) as Philo himself called them (in *Flaccum*, 47) and not simply *politai* (p. 237).” Yet let us cite the passage in full. What Philo tells us in fact is that upon a certain occasion it was feared that the enemies of the Jews would “τὴν ἀφορμὴν ἐκεῖθεν λαβόντες ἐπηρεάζωσι τοῖς πολίταις αὐτῶν Ἰουδαίους.” To follow Kasher, the pronoun αὐτῶν (which he conveniently omits) turns the anti-Semites — the fellow-citizens of the Jews according to Philo — into the “citizens” of the Jewish *politeuma*! Kasher’s interpretations of Josephus Flavius involve similar strains; it is hardly possible here to discuss every passage in detail.

To sum up, there are two main points we wish to make. First, the sources attest only one single Jewish *politeuma* in the entire Hellenistic Diaspora, that of Berenice in Cyrenaica, and what we know about it makes it by no means probable that this organizational pattern could have had a wide spread in other Jewish communities.³² Second, the concept of the *politeuma* of aliens as an “independent political unit” which could secure for its members any rights whatsoever belongs to the realm of historiographic legend, which can claim the support of quite a number of learned authorities but not a single source. This point is all the more important because it shows that even if we organize all the Hellenistic Jews in *politeumata*, as is usually done nowadays, it would have no bearing on the question of their legal and political status.

It could not be the aim of this short exposition to discuss the actual status of the Jews in Alexandria and elsewhere. Thus when we insist upon the fact that the Jews of Alexandria were not *politai* of their own independent *politeuma*, it is not to deny the well known evidence concerning their communal institutions and the limited autonomy they enjoyed. In Kasher’s view, these institutions were completely self-sufficient: “The fact that (the Jews) rejected Alexandrian citizenship with all its material benefits shows that their true aim was

32 On the variety of names and forms of associations attested to in Hellenistic Jewish communities, cf. J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l’Empire romain* I (Paris 1914) 413ff.

a separate independent life. That was always the essence of the Jewish struggle (p. 230).” Hence his concept of *politeuma*, which supposedly assured this, so to say, *cum dignitate* segregation. The view of the Hellenistic Diaspora which emerges appears to us so strikingly one-sided that we wonder if Kasher’s concept of a constant Jewish struggle for separateness does not in fact reveal a much stronger — though opposite — modern bias than could ever be imputed to Tcherikover. And is there not irony in the fact that the institution adopted by Kasher to embody the spirit of autarky turns out, on the contrary, to indicate the highest degree of Hellenistic acculturation ever attested to in a Jewish community?

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