

Cui bono? Antony's Execution of the Hasmonean King Antigonus Mattathias

This paper investigates the circumstances of the Roman execution of the Judaeen king Antigonus in 37 BCE. Although the Romans had executed conquered foreign leaders in the past, they rarely employed such a punishment for royal persons. In fact, prior to Antigonus, the only king we can be certain the Romans put to death was the Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix in 46 BCE (cf. Beard 2007). Instead of execution, the Romans' preferred punishment for conquered and deposed kings was to detain them in Italy or some other secure location (Braund 1984). In addition, it was Roman custom to display subjected enemy kings (regardless of sentencing) and their families in the victorious general's triumphal procession at Rome. The exhibition of these high-status captives reinforced the spectacle of the triumph and inflated the prestige of the conquering general (cf. Beard 2007). It is striking, then, that although Sosius eventually celebrated a triumph for his victory over the Jews, Antigonus was executed at Antioch. Thus, Rome's treatment of Antigonus, a foreign king executed far away from Rome, is an exceptional case in Roman history to this point.

Despite its uniqueness, the execution of Antigonus curiously has attracted little scholarly attention. Most scholars, it seems, do not question the circumstances or the significance of the execution. Instead, it appears as if they tacitly accept that the sources that mention the execution (Strabo, Josephus, Plutarch, Cassio Dio) form a single cohesive narrative. While some basic facts of the situation remain consistent in each (that Antigonus enticed the Parthians to install him as king during their invasion of Syria in 40 BCE and that he was executed at Antioch), the sources differ on who was behind the execution. Josephus, our best source, records rather ambiguously in the *Bellum Judaicum* that Antigonus "fell beneath the axe" (*BJ* 1.357). In the *Antiquitates Judaicae*, though, Josephus explicitly claims that Herod bribed Antony to kill Antigonus (*AJ*

14.490. However, Josephus seems to contradict himself later by implying that Antony made the decision in an attempt to pacify the rebellious Jews (*AJ* 15.8-9). On the other hand, Strabo, whom Josephus quotes in the *Antiquitates*, alleges that Antony alone decided to do away with Antigonus since in no other way could he weaken the Jews' zealous loyalty to the Hasmonaean king (*AJ* 15.9-10; *FGrH* 91 fr. 18). Our two later sources, Plutarch (*Antony* 36.2) and Cassius Dio (49.22), who adds the detail that Antigonus was flogged and crucified, likewise seem to suggest that Antony alone was responsible for the execution. However, they ultimately give no explicit qualification for their assertions and merely state the fact. The primary sources, then, do not offer a consistent explanation for Antigonus' execution.

At the same time, the accounts that Josephus and Strabo offer are themselves not entirely cogent. Indeed, since Josephus often uses bribery as a crutch to explain seemingly irrational behavior or events that he does not fully understand, it is not likely, given his original omission of it and vague wording in the *Bellum*, that we can fully accept this explanation of the execution. There is also reason to doubt Strabo's claim (and the similar implication of *AJ* 15.8-9) that Antony decided to execute Antigonus to send a message to the Jews. Aside from Dio's idiosyncratic account (likely a product of his theatrical style), there is no evidence that Antony made a public display of Antigonus' execution in Antioch or even exhibited his remains in Judaea – and this the man who nailed the hands and head of Cicero onto the Rostra barely six years prior.

Since the explanations of Josephus and Strabo are inadequate, this paper seeks to make sense of the Hasmonaean king's unprecedented demise in the context of the contemporaneous Roman political landscape. In doing so, the paper will show that the unusual execution of Antigonus was largely a product of the struggle between Antony and Augustus. Specifically, the

paper will consider Antigonus' death in light of the developing tendency of captured kings to become the political tools of powerful Roman individuals in the Late Republic. In doing so, the paper will demonstrate that Antony's execution of Antigonus was an astute political maneuver that precluded the possibility of Augustus coopting and using the Hasmonaean king against him in the future.

Select Bibliography

- Allen, Joel. *Hostages and Hostage-taking in the Roman Empire*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Beard, Mary. *The Roman Triumph*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Braund, David. *Rome and the Friendly King*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.
- Goodman, Martin. "Judaea." *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 4 (1996): 737-781.
- Pelling, Christopher. "The triumviral period." *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 4 (1996): 1-69.
- Richardson, Peter. *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996.