

## The Jewish Diaspora Revolt of AD 116-117: Domestic Terrorism and State Response

Near the end of Trajan's reign, yet in the middle of the *pax Romana*, mass fighting broke out between Jewish and gentile civilians in the eastern Roman Empire. Temples and roads were destroyed in Cyrene (e.g. *SEG* 17.804). According to Cassius Dio (68.32), Jews were banned from setting foot on the island of Cyprus after they were blamed for brutal fighting there. Violence raged in Alexandria and other parts of Egypt; the historian Appian was an eyewitness, and almost a victim (*Liber Arabicus* frag.) The army restored order by 117, and meanwhile attacked Jewish communities in the new Roman province of Mesopotamia. While the strong Jewish presence in Mesopotamia would recover, this was not the case in Cyprus, Cyrene, and Egypt, where Rome's harsh reprisals (according to our sources) amounted to ethnic cleansing, if not outright genocide. As Appian noted in passing (*BCiv.* 2.380), Trajan's response to the war in Egypt was to "extirpate the Jewish race," and Roman reaction in the other zones of conflict was just as decisive. All told, hundreds of thousands died as a result of this massive breakdown of public order (Dio 68.32).

Despite the Diaspora Revolt's momentous significance, it remains an extremely obscure episode. The meager and confused source record suffers from more than simple bad luck of text preservation. With the inherent ugliness of a civil war in which once peaceful neighbors slaughtered each other, no one emerged from this conflict looking good. The revolt soured the last days of an emperor destined for an exuberantly positive legacy as *Optimus Princeps*. Moreover, there is no satisfactory explanation for the revolt's origins. The sources suggest Jews initiated hostilities, and while no ancient text makes the claim, many scholars assume the various uprisings were somehow coordinated; one senses here the danger of anti-Semitic assumptions. From the perspective of Jewish studies, this murky event was sandwiched between two higher-

profile revolts that shook the center of Jewish civilization, Judaea, which was not much affected by the Diaspora Revolt. Furthermore, Rabbinic sources from late antique Galilee and Mesopotamia were not particularly interested by doomed Jewish fighters in the lands of Greco-Roman “Kittim.”

In 2005 Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev valuably collected and translated most of the scattered evidence (much of it in non-Indo-European languages). This leading study will long remain the starting point for further work, but the present paper seeks to advance our understanding of the Diaspora Revolt in three ways:

- 1.) I argue that we can expand the evidentiary base of the revolt to include more documents from Roman Egypt. For example, one papyrus document (*P.Brem.* 23) describes detailed police arrangements in Heptakomia during November 116, just as the revolt was menacing this area. Recently published ostraca (*O.Krok.* 93f) preserve timorous messages from a small garrison of out-posted soldiers who seem to fear they will be outnumbered during the war.
- 2.) Taken together, these texts and other evidence suggest the Diaspora Revolt led to an increase in policing during the second century. The growth of police institutions (e.g. civilian patrols and out-posted soldiers, recently documented in Fuhrmann 2005) is otherwise difficult to account for. The Diaspora Revolt may have been a significant impetus behind this broader trend.
- 3.) Although the revolt’s origins must remain mysterious, its outcomes do not; assessing the revolt’s effects in the context of public order and state control highlights the revolt’s overall significance. The Romans decisively suppressed a civilian insurrection in which both sides used terror as a method to achieve their goals. In

addition to ethnic cleansing and expanded police arrangements, the sources allow us to trace other state efforts to stabilize ravaged areas in the aftermath of the revolt. These efforts included commemoration of those killed by Jewish rebels, a reassertion of the imperial cult, redistribution of land that had belonged to Jews, and even the banning of “arrow-reed” and tamarisk reeds, which could be fashioned into bows and arrows (Mélèze-Modrzejewski 1989).

My paper concludes by arguing that the Diaspora Revolt is one of the most important events that most students of antiquity never hear about. It certainly merits more scholarly attention, despite the real difficulties one encounters when trying to understand this dark episode.

A printed handout of key texts will accompany my presentation.

List of works cited:

Fuhrmann, Christopher J. *Policing the Roman Empire: Soldiers, Administration, and Public Order*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012.

Mélèze-Modrzejewski, Joseph. “*Ioudaioi apheirêmenoi*”: La fin de la communauté juive en Egypte (115– 117 de n. è.).” In G. Thür, ed., *Symposium 1985: Vorträge zur griechischen und hellenistischen Rechtsgeschichte*, 337-361. Vienna: Böhlau, 1989.

Pucci Ben Zeev, Miriam. *Diaspora Judaism in Turmoil, 116/117 CE: Ancient Sources and Modern Insights*. Leuven: Peeters, 2005.