

Jerusalem vs. All Others: Petrus Cunaeus and the Reformulation
of the Herodotean Dichotomy of Greek and Barbarian

Petrus Cunaeus's early seventeenth century work, *De Republica Hebraeorum*, belongs to a genre common to his native Dutch Republic, that of the parallel state model (Eyffinger 2006). While this type of treatise does not require any particular nation for comparison, the ancient Israelites appeared in a number of such texts published throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Cunaeus was intimately familiar with at least three of these, having mentioned by name a text by Carolus Sigonius by the same title and Bonaventure Bertram's *De Politia Judaica* and been in contact with Hugo Grotius, who had an unpublished manuscript of the same nature (Boralevi 2002).

What has most often caused scholars to take note of Cunaeus's iteration in particular is his predilection for Jewish source material. He was one of the earliest Hebraists to include in his analysis not only Flavius Josephus, who was widely read, but also Torah scholars such as Abraham ibn Ezra, David Kimhi, and Maimonides (Ziskind 1978). While worthy of study, the focus on Hebrew language sources has caused a neglect of the myriad ways the Latin Chair of Leiden manipulated his Greek and Roman sources to reflect the political message he wanted to convey to the legislators of the Dutch Republic, then only a loose conglomerate of states: that the Hebrew Republic (the period extending from the entrance into the land of Canaan until the death of Solomon) was the most perfect government on earth, due to its divine laws and the strength of character and arms of its people (*De republica* I.praefatio.2-3). In order to do this, he positions the Hebrew Republic as the pinnacle of civilization, a league of city-states surrounded by barbaric neighbors. Chief among these he sees as Egypt, explaining the animosity between the

peoples: “Enimvero id odium nulla adeo ex re magis fuit, quam ex vitae studiorumque dissimilitudine.” (*De republica* I.V.1-2)

In an appropriation and reformulation of the Herodotean dichotomy of Greek and Barbarian, the Hebrews stand as the cultural, social, and legal superiors to even other proximate nations, which are described as effeminate, stupid, and sedentary. (*De republica* I.V.3-4) This trend also follows a geographic understanding of Greek ideas of barbarism, like that outlined by Klaus Karttunen for Herodotus’ *Histories*, in which Jerusalem stands as the epicenter of civilization. All the while Cunaeus enforces his reading of the Talmud with asides from such authors as Juvenal and Horace, Plutarch and Cicero, navigating works often understood as anti-Semitic in order to bolster his claims concerning the excellence of the Hebrew Republic. In a feat worthy of more attention than it has been granted, Cunaeus subverts this deeply entrenched dichotomy of Greek and Barbarian by substituting the ancient Hebrews for the Greeks.

Works Cited

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