

Bandits and Soldiers in Hellenistic and Roman Judea

This article seeks to explore the representation of local and foreign soldiers and bandits in Judea in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods. It is well known that Judea served as a crossroads in antiquity and as such also became incidentally the battlefield for many of the Diadochi. Rather than viewing a stark dichotomy between bandit and soldier, we find a spectrum of perceptions from villain to protector for the various fighting men marching through Judea.

Many factors problematize perceptions, such as the tendency of the Ptolemies and Seleucids to grant farmland in Coele-Syria more broadly to their soldiers, leading to outsiders raising temples to foreign deities, or the Seleucid hiring of their Samaritan neighbors. Jewish soldiers sometimes engaged in the conflicts as well, such as is evidenced in 1 Maccabees. ‘Bandits’ might often be rhetoric aimed at supporters of some aristocratic interloper or civil war contender...and before we redeem them too much, ‘bandits’ might also be a fair descriptor of how exactly these bands supported themselves in exile and in the wilderness. It is useful here to re-orient ourselves from a profit-seeking motive to a subsistence-seeking motive in furtherance to an ideological one (and often not truly a religious one, but a dynastic one). So Grünewald’s 2004 (originally 1999) construction of four types of bandits, including the ‘rivals and avengers (Rivalen, Rächer) is well-founded.

Yet further complications arise. Josephus often compares soldiers to bandits apparently as a shorthand for irregular or guerilla forces. (e.g. 2.56, 2.65). Here the ‘bandit-style’ (ληστρικός) troops are doing so as a calculated tactic. As noted by Mason’s commentary (2008), this construction is used by Appian and Strabo as well. ‘Bandit’, however, is more often used by Josephus to indicate disorder or incompetence than greed, a vice shared by many of the regular

soldiers (often mercenaries) that appear in writings of the period. This is hardly unique to Judea, for we find much the same language for disorganized groups in Livy, Xenophon, and Diodorus Siculus. Soldiers who act without discipline are acting like bandits (as noted in Beek 2015).

At the same time, the dynasts and high priests of Judea repeatedly claimed to be able to protect their followers from banditry and pillage, engaging in performative acts to show themselves as either militarily or diplomatically capable of protecting lands from plunder. Moreover, I argue this larger sense of a people continually afraid of outside depredations is thus reflected in both the description of figures like Diodotus Tryphon and some of the more pedantic and legalistic language preserving treaties and taxation laws that appear in both Josephus and in the books of the Maccabees. Ironically enough, several instances seem far more worried about the overlord state's rapacity than that of the highwaymen

Works Cited

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