

More than Migration: The Persistent Nomadism of the Jews in Tacitus's *Histories* 5.2-13

The origin of the Jews in Tacitus's "Jewish excursus" (*Histories* 5.2-13) exists as six theories, only one of which contains intimations of autochthony, the other five containing narratives of exile or displacement (and all are analyzed at length by Feldman [1996]). However, this chronic displacement is not confined to descriptions of physical movement, but repeated in Tacitus's depictions of Jewish ritual, geography, and governance.

In *Histories* 5.2, the Jews are called in turns fugitives (*profugos*), an overflowing multitude (*exundantem... multitudine*), and "vagabonds, a people in want of land" (*convenas, indigum agrorum populum*). While terms of movement are to be expected from any people not claiming autochthony, the intentional removal from a cultivated land is emphasized (such as in the account of an exodus in 5.3) and remembered in Tacitus's accounts of Jewish ritual, such as the "golden ass" set up in remembrance of their wandering (5.4: *effigiem animalis, quo monstrante errorem sitimque depulerant, penetrali sacravere*) and their bread, which is created to recall their period of displacement (5.4: *raptarum frugum argumentum panis Iudaicus nullo fermento detinetur*). In terms of geography, Tacitus also rejects any indications that Judaea is a country established with many cities. Jerusalem itself cannot be denied, both for its fame and Rome's imminent conquest. However, in describing the layout of Judaea, Tacitus stresses that the majority of human enclaves were little villages, with some towns added and a single capital, later referred to as an *urbs* (5.8: *Magna pars Iudaeae vicis dispergitur, habent et oppida; Hierosolyma genti caput*). If one gives any credence at all to Josephus's depiction of Judaeian geography in the *Jewish War* 3.54-56, there is a significant shrinking occurring in the *Histories*. Tacitus does not only construe the Jews as occupying a small, unclearly sketched country, but a disappearing one: the other *urbes* discussed in book five belong to those destroyed inhabitations

beside the lake now known as the Dead Sea (5.7: *Haud procul inde campi quos ferunt olim uberes magnisque urbibus habitatos fulminum iactu arsisse*). However, unlike the account of Josephus in which this devastation has a clear supernatural *αἰτία* (4.483-485), Tacitus denies the act (in this case) of any god, instead laying the blame on the nature of the land itself and perhaps the ineptitude of those who established these cities on inhospitable land; See Shahar (2004) for a comparison of these texts and their precursors, O’Gorman (1993) for an alternative take on the instability of this landscape. Just as Tacitus’s Jews are unable to maintain steady domiciles, they are unable to maintain established governments. As soon as a power vacuum was left in Judaea by the weakening of the Macedonians, the Judaeans are presented as choosing their own kings, only to have them immediately overthrown by the inconstancy of the rabble (5.8: *mobilitate vulgi*).

Tacitus’s displacement of the Jews, therefore, is occurring not only in backward-looking origin accounts, but also in reenactment rituals, vanishing dwellings, and the inability to establish a stable sovereignty. While the geographic normally takes precedence in discussing an attribute like nomadism, the paradigms of nomadism explored by Shaw (1982) and the depictions of nomadic barbarians of the periphery in Karttunen (2002) suggest other normative characteristics of transient peoples which the Jews of the *Historiae* typify, despite (or in addition to) their (often failed) trappings of settlement. By suggesting that the Jews not only arise from, but worship, dwell, and govern in a state of persistent nomadism, Tacitus makes use of familiar ethnographic paradigms to shape his representation of the Jews as a people necessarily, deservedly, and inevitably brought under the reign of Flavian Rome for their failure to settle into stable civilization.

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