

Relocating Andromeda: Greek Myths in Roman Palestine

The role of mythology in the construction of civic and social identities in Greece and the Roman ‘Greek East’ has been well-documented by scholars over the past half century (Rogers 1991, Fox 2008, MacSweeney 2014). Both regional and site-specific studies have described the ways in which Roman communities in the east promoted Greek heroes and other figures as founders and identified their local geographies with places and spaces from mythology. The connections forged through this identification served to establish and perpetuate cultural, ethnic, kinship and historical links between the cities of the eastern empire and the larger Greco-Roman Mediterranean.

To date, most of the work on foundation myths in the Roman East has focused on the rich corpus of literary and material evidence of Asia Minor (Rogers 1991, Price 2005, de Bellefonds 2011) with the Levant receiving much less attention. In this paper I draw Roman Palestine into this dialogue, arguing that the cities of this region also emphasized their connections to figures from Greek myth in order to situate themselves in the mytho-history of the Greco-Roman world. Using the locally produced coins from Gaza, Ascalon, Joppa, Ptolemais and Scythopolis I argue that the cities of the Roman Levant used many of the same practices as cities in Asia Minor to promote their role in Greek myth, and for the same ends. I build on Belayche’s work (2009) on foundation myths on the coins of Roman Palestine and argue that these ‘Hellenized’ cities sought their origins in Greek myth in order to orient their histories towards the Greco-Roman world and away from the histories of their Jewish neighbors. I focus specifically on examples in which local landmarks and geography were used by a community to connect themselves to a specific myth or hero (for example Joppa’s “Rocks of Andromeda”). I argue that this was part of a larger

attempt not simply to tap into Greek mythological traditions, but to claim primacy within that tradition through the unique local landscape.

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