

Manuscript versus Mosaic: Comparing the Representations of Jews and Judaism in Greco-Roman Textual and Visual Sources

This paper analyzes and compares the key features of Jews and Judaism in textual and visual Greco-Roman sources in the early Roman Empire from the first century B.C.E. until the beginning of the fourth century C.E. Ancient Greek and Latin authors described both Jewish cultural practices and religious beliefs in a variety of ways. Several modern scholars identified Jewish characteristics like “circumcision,” “avoidance of pork,” “aniconism,” and “Moses” in the writings of ancient gentile authors (Cohen 1999, 2008; Gager 1985; Goodman 1987; Modrzejewski 1995; Sanders, 1992). Although scholars often recognized the use of certain terms associated with Jewish culture and religious belief, there are few systematic analyses of references to Jews and Judaism in Greek and Latin texts. Using digital word frequency analysis on collections of writings like Menahem Stern’s *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (1980), this paper pinpoints the most common terms associated with Jews and Judaism in the writings of ancient gentile authors and compares these textual representations to visual representations in the art of the Roman Empire.

Upon comparison, Greek and Latin texts are not identical to the visual representations of Jewish populations in this same period. For example, circumcision in written texts, despite existing in various populations, typically referred to Jewish beliefs (Cohen 2008), but in Greek and Roman art, it was not isolated mainly to Jewish representation. Images of the god Priapus and apotropaic symbols included many circumcised phalluses (Slane 1993). This paper notes this and other important similarities and disparities between ancient Greco-Roman texts and art. Additionally, it demonstrates how literary and artistic elements participated in the forging of Greco-Roman conceptions of minority identity.

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