

GLORY AND DECLINE: SOME CAUSES OF THE ROMAN CONQUEST OF JUDAEA

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: Among the most understudied topics in ancient history are the complex causes of Pompey the Great's conquest of Judaea. However, it is one of the most important shifts in the power dynamics of the Levant and marked the decline of Jewish sovereignty over their territory. It also is a crucial episode to highlight the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the trend towards an expansionary empire. This research paper argues that Roman intervention came about due to a major shift in Roman governmental attitudes about the role of empire in the period after the Punic Wars, as well as Pompeius using the Hasmonean dynastic struggle and internal decline as *casus belli* for annexing them as a client state for his own personal military glory.

INTRODUCTION

From the time of Pompeius' military conquest of the Levant, Roman-Judaeian relations were strained. They heavily vacillated between salutary tolerance and open disgust. The Jews consistently rebelled against what they saw as a tyrannical power taking away autonomy and sovereignty. The Romans thought that the people of Judaea were xenophobic and that their customs were too strange. However, while it is well understood why the Jews revolted during the first and second centuries CE, not much has been written about the origins of the relationship. Indeed, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus' siege of Jerusalem in 63 BCE was a momentous shift in the power dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Understanding the causes behind the initial intervention into Judaeian politics and the ultimate siege is a key ingredient to better understanding our perceptions of the end of both the Roman Republic, and the Hasmonean State. Roman intervention in Judaea came about due to a major shift in Roman governmental attitudes about the role of empire in the period after the Punic Wars, as well as Pompeius using the Hasmonean dynastic struggle and internal decline as *casus belli* for annexing them as a client state for his own personal military glory.

EXPANSION TO THE EAST

The Roman Republic was one that became increasingly dominated by military glorification and wartime expansion. While it is debatable whether Rome's policy of "defensive imperialism" was as altruistic as the Roman historians portray it, a noticeable shift in attitude began starting in the First Republic of the Nobles. While the Roman state initially confined itself to a mutual alliance system within the Italian Peninsula, it began to expand rapidly to Sicily and beyond during the Punic Wars. This was a huge event because by defeating a major Mediterranean power, they could assert themselves as the dominant power of the region. Afterwards, they began to become much more interventionist in world affairs, and expand even further to acquire the riches of the Orient.

However, why did this shift occur, given that military conquest was not foreign to the Romans? While the ancient historians argued that it was primarily due to a moral decline,¹ the present author argues that it was due to the expanding nature of the Roman state. It increasingly became the case that as the territory expanded, the aristocratic Senate, which appeared to have been successful in limiting the scope of individual power, became unable (and soon unwilling) to maintain the necessary checks and

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balances on any one individual grasping for power.² The Senate, especially later on in the personification of Cato the Younger, was seen by those who were ambitious for power as an obstructionist obstacle toward “progress” and military victory.³ Ironically, as modern historians point out, the Senate was an exceptionally warlike governing body for the ancient world. For many Senators, it was wartime that not only temporarily resolved domestic problems but also made them wealthy in return. However, this was previously tempered by the kinship bonds that were present when Rome was a much smaller entity.⁴

To gain the support of the conservative masses for these conquests and power grabs, the factions who supported zealous men like Marius, Sulla, and Pompeius had to make sure that there was some Roman interest at stake. As the economist and sociologist Joseph Schumpeter pointed out,

There was no corner of the known world where some interest was not alleged to be in danger or under actual attack. If the interests were not Roman, they were those of Rome's allies; and if Rome had no allies, then allies would be invented. When it was utterly impossible to contrive such an interest – why, then it was the national honor that had been insulted.⁵

ROME IN DANGER

It was this line of reasoning that allowed for the Roman state to justify any new territorial expansion or interference with the internal politics of a faraway kingdom. While it is hard to know for sure, both the politicians and the people seemed to reject what they saw as “feminine” diplomacy in favor of conquest on a larger scale.⁶ It would be this new attitude that paved the way toward wars with the Hellenized kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean, including the Jews.

The hostilities between the Roman Republic and the kingdoms of Pontus and Armenia in Asia Minor soon led to increased contact with the Hasmonean State. While they had previously signed a peace treaty of friendship and trade with the Maccabees in 161 BCE,⁷ it was during the Post-Sulla Era that Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus would seek to promote his military accomplishments through a victory over the Eastern Mediterranean. Before moving onto the events that brought Pompeius to Judaea, however, a background in the affairs of Israel is necessary to provide context before the events of the Third Mithridatic War.

THE HASMONEANS

The Hasmoneans were the leaders of the Jewish kingdom in the southern Levant. The dynasty was born out of the Maccabean Revolt of 161 BCE against Antiochus Epiphanes IV and the Seleucid Greeks based in Syria.⁸ While Judas, Jonathan, and Simon Maccabee, followed Jewish law very closely and respected the rights of the Priesthood, the rest of the Hasmonean monarchs would re-establish a Hellenized Israel that would grow corrupt, expansionist, and persecuted the minority populations such as the Idumeans.⁹ It was due to their insistence on taking on the title of High Priest (traditionally delegated to the descendants of Aaron) that there emerged political factions, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, that would dominate even beyond the destruction of the Hasmoneans.¹⁰

After the death of Queen Salome Alexandra in 67 BCE, there emerged a serious dynastic struggle between the children of the queen. Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II were brothers who both sought the throne and the High Priesthood. The Pharisees openly sided with Hyrcanus, and the Sadducees sided with Aristobulus due to his strong leadership qualities.¹¹ While Hyrcanus was the legitimate heir and had been appointed to High Priest during Alexandra's reign,¹² Aristobulus seized control of the palace fortress and raised an army in a palace coup, leading to a protracted struggle between the brothers.¹³ To settle this dispute, Pompeius was brought in as a neutral arbitrator. This, as Josephus points out, was because Hyrcanus had failed to successfully bribe the Arabian King Aretas of Petra in helping him to reclaim his throne.¹⁴¹⁵ It was also convenient because he was already in the area defeating Mithridates and the Armenians, who also happened to be a thorn in the side of the Hasmonean monarchs.¹⁶

DRIVE FOR GLORY

How did Pompeius become involved in the affairs of Asia Minor in the first place? In sum, it was prompted by his ambition and drive for glory. As Plutarch relates, he saw himself from an early age in the mold and image of Alexander the Great.¹⁷ Just like the Gracchi, Marius, and Sulla before him, Pompeius would use his drive and ambition to take advantage of the internal decay of the bloated aristocratic system. However, he would take the individual lust for glory to level that exceeded the precedent-shattering effects of his predecessors.¹⁸ After urging Sulla to give him the title of Magnus and two previous triumphs, during the 60s BCE, he latched onto Lucius Licinius Lucullus' somewhat successful war with the Kingdoms of Pontus and Armenia, to claim complete unilateral victory over Asia Minor and obtain a third triumph.¹⁹ On his way back to Rome, he decided to make sure that there were monarchs that were friendly to Rome throughout the Levant, Cyprus, and Crete. The Hasmonean situation offered the enterprising Pompeius an opportunity to expand Rome's territory even further than the war with Mithridates could offer.

However, the situation in Judaea turned out to be more complicated than Pompeius realized. Aristobulus managed to send an envoy to Pompeius' representative in Syria, Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, promising a generous 8,000 kg of silver for protection against Hyrcanus, and for Pompeius an 800kg golden vine. Having gained Pompeius' favor, Aristobulus was safe from his brother, until he made an unfortunate mistake. He had sent an envoy to Pompeius asking him to punish Aemilius who, according to Aristobulus, had extorted 8,000 kg of silver (which had been promised from the get-go).²⁰ Pompeius decided to come to Jerusalem to see for himself what was going on, and decided to reverse his course of action by siding with the more pro-Roman Hyrcanus.

Having the backing of the Roman military might, Hyrcanus' followers allowed the general to enter the common area of Jerusalem. However, Aristobulus, and the Sadducee faction that supported him, still occupied the Holy Temple grounds. However, Pompeius did not attack immediately. While Josephus' insistence that it was timed to correspond with the Jewish Day of Atonement, the more likely explanation is that, in keeping with his trend of self-glorification, he wished to enter the temple complex on his birthday.²¹ Pompeius' soldiers entered the Temple terrace, where Jewish soldiers committed suicide, because they did not want to see the profanation of the sanctuary.²² Eventually, he managed to capture and arrest Aristobulus, who was paraded around Rome during his Third Triumph.²³ Thousands of Jews who had supported the fallen king were either massacred or captured and sold into slavery back in Rome.²⁴

Initially, the Jews writ large (and especially the increasingly popular Pharisees) welcomed the overthrow as a means of getting rid of an illegitimate king. However, Pompeius committed a grave act by entering the most sacred part of the Holy Temple, the Holy of Holies. Traditionally, only the High Priest could enter this room, and even then, only on the holiest day of the Hebrew calendar Yom Kippur. According to Josephus,

no small enormities were committed about the temple itself, which, in former ages, had been inaccessible, and seen by none; for Pompey went into it, and not a few of those that were with him also, and saw all that which it was unlawful for any other men to see but only for the high priests.²⁵

While Pompeius ordered a cleaning of the Temple and refused to take any of the treasure/sacred objects found inside, the Jews saw this as a blasphemous act. This changed the relationship between Rome and Judaea, which had previously been nominally friendly from the beginning of the Hasmonean Period. The Jews were hostile to the new regime, and the following years witnessed frequent insurrections to restore Maccabean values and full sovereignty. This marked the beginning of the hostility between Judaea and Rome that sparked frequent revolts and would culminate in the Jewish Revolt (67-73) and the destruction of the Temple.^{26,27}

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When the Romans replaced the Seleucids as the great power in the region, they soon began a divide and conquer strategy to ensure that power was divided among the various people groups in the region.²⁸ The Jewish kingdom, apart from the area surrounding Jerusalem, was either annexed or given to surrounding friendly client kingdoms. Hyrcanus could continue being the high priest and ethnarch, and was awarded the honorary title of "Ally and Friend of the Roman People."²⁹ However, his autonomous kingship was stripped, and was required to pay a large tribute. While there would be some final attempts by Aristobulus (who had escaped from prison multiple times) and the upstart Mattathias Antigonus to restore the former glory of the Hasmonean dynasty, Judaea would be annexed as a full province of the Roman Empire, under the rule of Hyrcanus II's son-in-law, the Idumean Herod the Great.³⁰

CONCLUSION

In short, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus' conquest of Judaea was brought about by a change in Roman imperialist values as well as internal dynastic politics that plagued the Hasmonean State from the outset. While some later Roman historians living during the second and third centuries CE often wrote about the conquest as if it were an inevitable outcome of their military glory,^{31,32} from the writings of Titus Flavius Josephus one can gather that it was forced upon an unwilling population who desired to be left alone. From both ancient sources as well as modern scholarship, one concludes that it was the expanding and changing nature of the Roman state that allowed for someone like Pompeius to embark on the military conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean in the first place. Indeed, while the Romans believed that they were doing business as usual, they, as well as the Jews, would be sorely mistaken in the decades to come.

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¹ While most Roman historians were moralists to some extent, for this period it is seen most prominently in Polybius, Sallust, and Cassius Dio.

² Hoyos, Dexter. *A Companion to Roman Imperialism*. (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2010), 160-8.

³ McCarthy, Daniel. "Military Decadence in Ancient Rome." Lecture, Presented at the Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn, AL, July 17, 2003.

⁴ Eckstein, Arthur, "Conceptualizing Roman Imperial Expansion under the Republic," in *A Companion to the Roman Republic*, ed. Nathan Rosenstein and Robert Morghenstern-Marx. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing LTD, 2010), 572-3.

⁵ Schumpeter, Joseph. *Imperialism and Social Classes*, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 50-52.

⁶ Lintott, A.W. "Imperial Expansion and Moral Decline in the Roman Republic" *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 48, 1 (1972): 626-38.

⁷ 1 Maccabees 8:17-20.

⁸ They revolted for a variety of reasons, chief among them were the opposition to the Hellenization process and the tyrannical intervention of Antiochus IV with regards to transforming the Holy Temple into a place for worshipping Zeus. See the Book of 1 Maccabees for more detail.

⁹ The Idumeans were a group of people living in the Negev Desert of southern Judaea. They were alleged to be the descendants of the Edomites described in the Bible.

¹⁰ The Pharisees were the ancestors of the modern rabbinic style of Judaism, and believed in a written Torah, and an oral Torah given at Mount Sinai. By contrast, the Sadducees, supposedly descendants of the priest Zadok, believed in only a written, literal Torah. However, at the time, doctrinal differences were secondary to the political dynamics of the time. See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:1.

¹¹ Although Josephus often contradicts himself in his works, declaring in *Wars* that the people preferred Aristobulus over Hyrcanus while in *Antiquities* he states that the people were displeased with the whole affair. See Bellemore, Jane. "Josephus, Pompey, and the Jews" *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 48, 1 (1999): 99.

¹² Women were not allowed to serve in this role, so she delegated the role to Hyrcanus.

¹³ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*. 1.128. Josephus is quite critical of Hyrcanus II's abilities to govern the country in both of his works, and often refers to his ineptness. Interestingly, by contrast, Julius Caesar often praises him. See Schwartz, Daniel R. "Josephus on Hyrcanus II" in *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period: Essays in Memory of Morton Smith* ed. Parente, Fausto and Sievers, Joseph, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 210-32.

¹⁴ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 1.131.

¹⁵ Cassius Dio has a different interpretation stating that it was because they had violated the rights of the Phoenicians. See Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 15.2-16.4.

¹⁶ Ben-Sasson, H.H. *A History of the Jewish People*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 222-24.

¹⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 2.1-2.

¹⁸ Throughout his *Parallel Lives* Plutarch emphasizes that Pompeius was able to rise above Sulla and the Senate in his ambition for power and multiple triumphs. Plutarch, as a moralist, bemoans the fact that he was able to rise above Pompeius through what might be called "backhanded" methods instead of the conventional rise through the hierarchy of political life. He insisted on Sulla giving him the title of Magnus (the Great) to his name without ever having been a senator, praetor, or consul. See Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 31.1-4.

¹⁹ For this campaign, Pompeius was able to bribe Publius Clodius Pulcher to undermine Lucullus by spreading the rumor that he was deliberately protracting the conflict. This caused a mutiny among the soliders that led to the Senate passing the *lex Manilia*, authorizing Pompeius assuming command. See Plutarch, *Life of Lucullus*, 32-5.

²⁰ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 1.128

²¹ Scott, James M. *Bacchus Iudaeus: A Denarius Commemorating Pompey's Victory over Judea*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co., 2015), 100-5.

²² Sarte, Maurice. *The Middle East Under Rome*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 40-42.

²³ Appian, "The Mithridatic Wars." 17:114.

²⁴ Goodman, Martin. *Rome and Jerusalem* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 52-3.

²⁵ Josephus. *The Wars of the Jews* 1.152-3. *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.71-3.

²⁶ Hadas-Lebel, Miereille. *Jerusalem Against Rome*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 20-23.

²⁷ The hostility was not one sided, as Roman historians like Tacitus developed a special hatred of the Jews and their seemingly strange customs and perceived xenophobia. See Schäfer, Peter. *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

²⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14:61-2, 70-1.

²⁹ Schäfer, Peter. *Jews into the Greco-Roman World*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 83.

³⁰ Schäfer, Peter. *Jews in the Greco-Roman World*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 76-78.

³¹ Tacitus *Historiae V, The Roman Conquest of Judaea*.

³² As well as historical determinists in the era before the rise of revisionism. See Bevan, E.R. "The Jews" in *Cambridge Ancient History: Vol. IX*, ed. Cook, S.A., et al, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 397-404 for an example of an "orthodox" history.