

What Have the Romans ever Done for Us? How to Win Wars and also the Peace¹

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REG: All right, but apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?

ATTENDEE: Brought peace?

REG: Oh, peace – shut up!

(Life of Brian, 1979).

The Roman Empire was one of the largest and most successful empires in world history. Not only did the Romans win the wars, but they also won the peace, *pax Romana*. Even after the collapse of the western part of the empire, the idea of *Imperium Romanum* continued to have a strong positive cultural, ideological and symbolic effect on European history. In that respect the Romans differed from other successful empire-builders of the Iron Age such as the Assyrians, whom people under the influence of Judeo-Christian tradition remember for the fear their brutality inspired.

The Romans, however, also used terror and brutality in building their empire. In 146 BC, Carthage and Corinth suffered. No empire can be maintained without the employment of retaliatory measures if necessary. In that respect the Romans did not differ from the Persians who, in 494 BC, destroyed the city of Miletos and deported its population, or the Athenians, who in 416 BC, showed no mercy when Melos declined to join their empire. All the men were killed; the women and children were enslaved.

The Romans were distinguished by having at their disposal one of the most professional, well-equipped, well-organised and well-commanded military forces that the world has ever seen. There might be problems at the frontiers, but internally local revolts were normally no match for the Roman army when it intervened. The army was also a guarantee for peace within the empire. This of course had to be financed by imposing taxes. In some parts of the empire it made no difference to the population whether the taxes were paid to the former rulers or to the Romans, if the burden was within reason, even if some of them had to get used to paying not in kind, but in cash. In other parts of the empire where taxation had been rudimentary the Romans had to convince the locals that the peace was worth the price – even if they had to do it the hard way.

The Romans' military superiority and their ability to maintain law and order were undoubtedly crucial for the stability of their empire, but military superiority cannot be the only answer. The Romans had more to offer. In the famous scene in the movie *Life of Brian* (1979), the leader of the People's Front of Judaea, Reg (John Cleese) asks the attendees: "What have the Romans ever done for us?"

What differentiated the Romans from most other empire builders was their willingness to share the fruits of the Empire with the subdued populations, whether they were inhabitants of cities on the same cultural level as themselves or tribal populations with a less sophisticated way of life. If you belonged to the local elite, the chance of attaining even the rank of Roman senator was at least one hundred times greater than our chance of winning one of the big prizes in the weekly lotto. In 98, Rome even got an emperor born in Spain. If you belonged to the lower stratum of the population, enlistment in the Roman army was a way to obtain Roman citizenship for yourself and your descendants, if it was not awarded to your community by the emperor as a favour.

The ancients were well aware of this. According to Tacitus, the Roman commander Cerialis, sent to Gaul by Vespasian, held the following speech in defence of the Roman rule to the Treviri and Lingones who had revolted during the chaotic years after the fall of Nero:

There were always kings and wars throughout Gaul until you submitted to our laws. Although often provoked by you, the only use we have made of our rights as victors has been to impose on you the necessary costs of maintaining peace; for you cannot secure tranquillity among nations without armies, nor maintain armies without pay, nor provide pay without taxes: everything else we have in common. You often command our legions; you rule these and other provinces; we claim no privileges, you suffer no exclusion. (Tac. *Hist.* 4.74, translation by C.H. Moore).

We do not know if Cerialis ever delivered a speech like that. It is also propaganda, and we have to distinguish between rhetoric and reality. Still, it has a core of truth in it. Dionysios of Halikarnassos noted the difference between the Romans and the Greeks:

There was yet a third policy of Romulus, which the Greeks ought to have practised above others, it being, in my opinion, the best of all political measures, as it laid the most solid foundation for the liberty of the Romans and was no slight factor in raising them to their position of supremacy. It was this: not to slay all the men of military age or to enslave the rest of the population of the cities captured in war or to allow their land to go back to pasture

for sheep, but rather to send settlers thither to possess some part of the country by lot and to make the conquered cities Roman colonies and even grant citizenship to some of them. (Dion. Hal. 2.16, translated by E. Cary).

The Emperor Claudius pursued the same line of thought in his speech to the Roman senate in AD 48, when he proposed to admit prominent Gallic citizens into the Senate:²

The day of stable peace at home and victory abroad came when the districts beyond the Po were admitted to citizenship and, availing ourselves of the fact that our legions were settled throughout the globe, we added to them the stoutest of the provincials, and succoured a weary empire. Is it regretted that the Balbi crossed over from Spain and families equally distinguished from Narbonese Gaul? Their descendants remain; nor do they yield to ourselves in love for this native land of theirs. What else proved fatal to Lacedaemon and Athens, in spite of their power in arms, but their policy of holding the conquered aloof as alien-born? But the sagacity of our own founder Romulus was such that several times he fought and naturalized a people in the course of the same day. Strangers have been kings over us: the conferment of magistracies on the sons of freedmen is not the novelty which it is commonly and mistakenly thought, but a frequent practice of the old commonwealth. (Tac. *Ann.* 11.24, translated by J. Jackson).

However, nobody likes to be dominated by a neighbour or a foreign power, even if this is to some benefit. The Americans have learned that lesson in Iraq. They have removed a dictator, given the Iraqis the prospect of democracy, free speech (within certain limits), participation in a capitalistic world economy and access to all the seductive goods of western society, but still a large part of the population in Iraq asks: "What have the Americans ever done for us?"

The United States won the war, but they have not won the peace yet. What made the population around the Mediterranean, Gaul and Britain more susceptible to "Romanisation" than the Iraqi to "Americanisation"?

I will start by asking the question: how big was the difference really between the Roman masters and the subdued populations? At first glance there seems to be a huge difference between the tribal population in Britain and the population in the eastern Hellenistic cities, and Rome itself had only recently entered the Hellenistic world from a strictly cultural point of view. However, they also had many things in common. The family structure and the basic values associated with a good and successful life in tribal Britain or Gaul did not differ from those of the Mediterranean world. They also shared

what we would define as the concept of gift exchange and some kind of patronage.³ There were leaders and followers; and politics involved alliances, opportunism and betrayal. During the Roman conquest of Gaul Caesar and Vercingetorix understood each other perfectly well, even if they did not speak the same tongue. Basically they were playing the same game. Arminius, the German chieftain of the Cherusci tribe, obtained Roman citizenship, served in the Roman auxiliary forces and attained equestrian rank. As we all know he paid back the favour in a special way in AD 9 by annihilating Varus' army, but it was not because he belonged to a fundamentally different culture. He just played the game, and even Tacitus expressed admiration of his leadership and greatness, as a liberator of Germany, *liberator Germaniae* (*Ann.* 2.88). In the following period, an increasing number of Germans were enlisted in the Roman auxiliary forces. In the Eastern Mediterranean Roman commanders such as Pompey, Caesar and Antony had no problems in adapting themselves to the politics of the Hellenistic world.

The ancient world was, from an early stage, very cosmopolitan across political, linguistic and cultural borders.⁴ The Roman king Tarquinius Superbus took refuge with the Greek tyrant Aristodemus in Cumae after he was expelled from Rome (Livy 1.49.9; 2.21). Perikles and the Spartan king Archidamos, opponents during the Peloponnesian war, were united by friendship (Plut. *Per.* 33.2); Themistokles, the victor of Salamis, ended his days as a Persian satrap (Thuk. 1.137-138), to take just a few examples. This cosmopolitan world was not restricted to the elite. Greek mercenaries served in the Persian and Egyptian armies.⁵ Greek artisans and traders settled abroad in non-Greek societies, and during the sailing season captains and their crews reached foreign harbours and became acquainted with their inhabitants.⁶ Contacts between the Celtic area and the Mediterranean had been established already in the early Iron Age. The early Etruscan (Villanova) and Roman Iron Age culture is often labelled as an "urnfield" culture, together with the so-called Hallstatt culture north of the Alps.⁷

Even if the ancients did not have our modern infrastructure and means of communication, in many respects they lived in a much more cosmopolitan world than we do, with fewer cultural differences. In spite of increasing globalisation, the differences between the American and Iraqi ways of thinking and living are huge. They involve family structure, the position of the individual, basic values, social structure and also, to some degree, the rules of politics.

Sharing some basic cultural values, however, is no guarantee of peaceful coexistence. It depends on how the different population groups define themselves in relation to each other. It involves the feeling of identity and loyalty. In modern Turkey the differences between Turkish and Kurdish culture are not really that great when viewed from outside. Notwithstanding, a large part of the Kurdish population in the eastern part of Turkey stresses that food, music, family life, women's position etc. among the Kurds are markedly dif-

ferent from the Turkish way of life. The modern Greeks also deny that they share some important cultural characteristics of the old Ottoman Empire with the Turkish population in the western part of modern Turkey.

The issue of identity and loyalty in the ancient world is very complicated, and it needs a series of case studies of local communities where we also have local sources. My approach will be different. I will consider the group in the Roman Empire that definitely had no positive feelings about “what the Romans had ever done for them”, namely the Jews. I will follow in the steps of Fergus Millar in his brilliant paper, *Empire, Community and Culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Arabs*, from 1989, but will extend my scope also to the rest of the Roman Empire.

At first sight the Jews did not differ markedly from the rest of the population around the Mediterranean. Their family structure and the basic values surrounding it were not so exceptional. The Jews were also very cosmopolitan. Jewish families and smaller communities could be found not only around the Mediterranean, but also in the Parthian empire, and many of them were engaged in trades and commerce with a well-functioning international network.⁸ Some Jewish families in Alexandria built up enormous fortunes.⁹ We find Jewish mercenaries in the Ptolemaic army, and some even advanced to be generals.¹⁰ It is true that the Jewish monotheistic religion and some cultural characteristics such as the observance of a day they called the Sabbath, circumcision and the prohibition against eating pork were alien to most of their neighbours. However, a large part of the Jewish population had adopted the Greek way of life without forsaking their ancestral faith. In the middle of the second century BC, the Hellenistic ruler Antiochos IV intervened in the conflict between the Hellenistic and the more orthodox Jews of Jerusalem.¹¹ After serious uprisings he issued an edict through which he tried to Hellenise the more orthodox Jews by banning their practices with disastrous results.¹² Part of the Jewish population, led by Judas Makkabaios, revolted, and the Seleucids lost control of an important border province. However, as long as the central authorities allowed the more orthodox Jews to observe their practices, there was no reason why the Jews could not be incorporated into the Hellenistic or Roman multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic empires and benefit from peace, law and order and live a good and prosperous life.

In 63 BC Pompey secured Roman control of Palestine without direct annexation. Caesar, who had been assisted by the Jews in Alexandria, continued this policy, and in 40 BC the Roman senate appointed Herod king of Judaea. In reality he was a client king, but at least officially, Judaea had once again become an independent kingdom.

Moreover, Josephos quotes an edict of AD 2/3 in which Augustus confirmed the Jewish rights to perform their religion and practices (Joseph. *AJ* 16.162-165). According to Josephos it was inscribed on a pillar in the temple of Caesar in Rome. The authenticity of the edict has been questioned, as well

as its universal address.¹³ However, later in a letter to the Alexandrians (see below) Claudius refers to an Augustan edict, though it is not clear whether it is a universal or local one. There is no reason to doubt that Augustus issued an edict, even if its actual wording may be questioned, and it demonstrates the Roman willingness to accommodate the Jewish population. At the outset the first Jewish encounter with the Romans looked promising for the future relations.¹⁴ Then things slowly began to go wrong.¹⁵

The Romans had definitely hoped to control the area through the King, the elite and the Jewish high priesthood in the traditional way. However, the rule of Herod and especially that of his descendants was never popular with the common people, and the elite too lacked popular support.¹⁶ Old tension between more Hellenised and more traditional, urban and rural Jews prevailed. Not even the high priesthood was able to exercise control. The Jewish people never developed a strong hierarchal religious organisation as the later Christian church did. The Jewish religion was quite capable of surviving without one, because local assemblies existed complementary to and parallel with the Temple organisation, probably already from the second century BC.¹⁷ They were later to develop into the institution of the synagogue after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70. In AD 6, Augustus intervened at the request of the local population, and Judaea became a Roman province. He solved one problem, but without knowing it laid the basis for another yet to come. In AD 6 the so-called Zealot movement was founded with the aim to regain the independence of Judaea. We do not have space to go into details about the events leading up to the great Jewish uprising in 66-73, the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132-135 and the actual wars. I will confine myself to some aspects of the conflicts.

We will start not in Palestine, but in Alexandria, and not with a Roman-Jewish conflict, but a local one. In 41 serious riots broke out in Alexandria between the Jewish community, which demanded full citizenship in Alexandria, and the Greek population, which wanted their own senate and viewed the Jewish privileges and also the position of some Jews high up in the Roman administration of Alexandria with suspicion and envy.¹⁸ They felt neglected by the Roman central authorities. Moreover, the Greeks had not forgotten that the Jews supported Caesar, and the Jewish community was probably a perfect target for their frustrations.

After the Roman army had established law and order, both parties sent delegations, the Jewish even two, representing different factions, to the emperor for support and to offer an apology for the riots. Claudius' answer is preserved in a papyrus from Egypt.¹⁹

As to the disturbances and rioting against the Jews – rather, the war against them, if I am to use the accurate term – and the question which side was originally responsible, although your envoys, especially Dionysios son of Theon, have zealously maintained

their case at length in the confrontation, I have none the less been unwilling to examine the matter in detail, reserving implacable wrath for those who started it up again. I tell you plainly, that if you do not put an end to this disastrous, outrageous frenzy against one another, I shall be forced to show you what a well-disposed Emperor is like when he becomes justifiably angry.

Accordingly even at this late stage I adjure the Alexandrians to show humanity and good will towards Jews who have been living in the same city with them for generations, and not to do anything to desecrate the practices connected with the cult of their god, but to allow them to keep the same customs as they followed under the deified Augustus, which I too have confirmed after having heard both sides. And as to the Jews, I tell them straight out not to waste time working for any more privileges than they had before, nor in the future to send two separate delegations as if they were living in two separate cities, which is something that has never happened before; nor are they to force their way into games arranged by gymnasiarchs or *cismetici*, since as it is they enjoy their own privileges as well as benefiting from an abundance of unstinted advantages when they are living in a city that does not belong to them. And they are not to bring in or admit Jews sailing from Syria or Egypt, which will inevitably increase our suspicions. Otherwise I shall proceed against them in every way as spreading what amounts to a worldwide epidemic.

If your two parties renounce those courses and are willing to live together with mutual forbearance and amity, I too shall give careful attention to the city which comes into our hands like a house inherited from our ancestors. (Smallwood 1967, 370).

This was really a complicated situation. To support one of the parties would only make things worse, and Claudius decided to do nothing. Instead he speaks to the Jews and the Greeks in Alexandria as a father speaks to naughty children! I will not investigate who started all this, and no one will be punished. Let us start afresh. Behave yourselves and you will benefit from my generosity. If not, you will really be in for it. And then there will be no mercy.

It is characteristic that the problems started as a local conflict between the Jews and their neighbours. The Jews were a relatively clearly defined group with special characteristics, not only in Alexandria. There was also trouble in Rome in 41, and Claudius was compelled to deny the Jews the right to assemble in the capital of the Empire (Dion Cass. 60.6; Suetonius, *Claudius* 25). The Romans were obviously well informed about the Jewish religion, their practices,



Fig. 1. Tetradrachm of the Bar Kokhba revolt, AD 133/4 (University of Aarhus).

their peculiarity and exclusiveness. The sons of Herod the Great spent part of their upbringing in Rome.²⁰ M. Julius Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great, and his son, spent many years at the imperial court.²¹ The Romans received several embassies from Judaea.²² Tacitus later wrote, "In order to secure the allegiance of his People in the future, Moses prescribed for them a novel religion quite different from those of the rest of mankind", and then he goes into details (Tac. *Hist.* 5.4). He also adds: "They will not eat or intermarry with gentiles" (Tac. *Hist.* 5.5). They were also well aware of the interregional network of the Jews. Claudius, in his speech, mentions Jews sailing in from Syria and other parts of the province of Egypt. In a much later very serious revolt in 115-117 during the reign of Trajan diasporic Jews in Egypt, Cyrenaica and Cyprus coordinated their actions, and once again it all started as local conflicts.²³

In spite of this the Romans obviously underestimated the political dynamite in the Jewish culture, the strength of the Zealot movement and its popular appeal. Up to the great war in 66-73 only 6 cohorts were stationed in Judaea. Then in 66 the Roman procurator Gessius Florus made a stupid decision: He charged the Temple in Jerusalem a tax. The Jews revolted, and the conflict escalated.²⁴ The determination and bitter commitment of the rebels caught the Romans napping. Nero had to send one of his most able commanders Vespasian with his son Titus to Judaea and commit 4 legions with auxiliaries, equivalent to one seventh of the entire Roman army, in an area not bigger than Jutland in Denmark.²⁵ Even if the military operations were disrupted by the fall of Nero in 68 and the subsequent dynastic troubles in Rome, it took the Romans two years to get control of the countryside, and Titus' siege of Jerusalem lasted four months. The last stronghold, Masada, kept on fighting until 73, when the defenders, men, women and children, preferred collective suicide to surrendering after a siege of sixth months. The Roman revenge was terrible: the destruction of the symbolic centre of the Jewish culture and

religion, the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was plundered of its holy relics and the spoils brought to Rome in triumph. No longer were the Jews able to count on any imperial protection, such as they had enjoyed since the reign of Augustus. Claudius' threat from 41 materialized.

The Jewish war in 66-73 is an extremely interesting conflict not only as regards antiquity, but also for world history. First of all, it happened when the Roman Empire displayed no signs of weakness, even though Nero was very unpopular with the Roman ruling class. If the revolt had happened after the fall of Nero, it would have made much more sense. The procurator Gessius Florus surely made a stupid decision, but the Jews did the same when they escalated the conflict to a war against an overwhelming military power. That is also the message of Josephos in his *Jewish Wars*, where he has a digression on the Roman army and its professionalism:

Where counsel thus precedes active operations, where the leader's plan of campaign is followed up by so efficient an army, no wonder that the Empire has extended its boundaries on the east to the Euphrates, on the west to the ocean, on the south to the most fertile tracts of Libya, on the north to Ister and the Rhine. One might say without exaggeration that, great as are their possessions, the people that won them are greater still.

If I have dwelt at some length on this topic, my intention was not so much to extol the Romans as to console those whom they have vanquished and deter others, who may be tempted to revolt. (*BJ* 3.5.7-8, translated by H.St.J. Thackeray).

The Romans experienced many local revolts in their empire, but normally it happened when the central authorities were weakened or had lost control, as for example in some parts of Gaul after the fall of Nero. The rebels simply gambled on some chance of success. One conclusion can be drawn: it is obvious that the events of 66 in Judaea unleashed forces that neither the Romans nor the Jewish leaders could have foreseen or been able to control.

Secondly, the Romans experienced what can be classified as a total mobilisation against Roman rule, including extensive guerrilla warfare, which presupposes a strongly motivated population, ready to make extensive sacrifices. As Tacitus stated it, "The Jews displayed an inflexible determination, women no less than men, and the thought that they might be compelled to leave their homes made them more afraid of living than of dying" (*Tac. Hist.* 5.13). The Romans faced the same problem as the Americans in Vietnam and Iraq, the Soviets in Afghanistan and the Israeli in the occupied territories, namely that of fighting irregular troops. The Romans had experienced that before in Gaul and Spain, but not to the same extent.

The Romans learned the lesson, and thereafter a full legion was stationed

in Judaea. With the establishment of the province of Arabia in the beginning of the second century another legion was stationed in Bostra in the southern part of modern Syria within only two days of striking distance. The Jews, however, did not seem to have learned the lesson nor listened to the words of Josephos. I have already mentioned the serious revolt in 115-117 during the reign of Trajan among the diasporic Jews in Egypt, Cyrenaica and Cyprus. In 132-135 we have the last great revolt in Judaea, the so-called Bar Kokhba revolt, named after the Jewish leader Shim'on ben Kosiba or Bar Kokhba.²⁶ Once again, the odds were against the Jews. The Roman Empire was in a healthy state, but again, it was a bitter fight involving guerrilla tactics. The emperor Hadrian transferred one of his best commanders, Julius Severus, from the distant province of Britannia to Judaea. Severus commanded a large force for several seasons before the area was pacified. The Jews were banned from the centre of Jerusalem, or Aelia Capitolina as it had been renamed in 130, and one more legion was stationed in the province for the next two centuries. After 135, the Jews no longer seem to have the political, urban, or territorial institutions that could support another great revolt, even if there were minor uprisings during the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Septimius Severus. At last the Romans had won not only the war, but also the peace, but at very high costs. They had to do it the Assyrian way.

The causes of the revolt are obscure. Unlike the first war, for which the Jewish historian Josephos is a contemporary source, our sources for this last Jewish war are later – Dion Cassius and Eusebios – and not so detailed. Probably they were religious and symbolic: Hadrian's prohibition of circumcision, which the Romans looked upon as a barbaric rite, the renaming of Jerusalem as *Aelia Capitolina* in 130 and perhaps also the plans to refound Jerusalem as a Roman colony. There is, however, no scholarly consensus of what caused the revolt and what should be considered part of the Roman repressive measures that followed it.²⁷

Whatever the causes, we have one excellent source for the uprising, which can add some new dimensions to our understanding of the relationship between the Jews and the Roman Empire. During the revolt the Jews issued a series of coins: tetradrachms, drachms and three bronze denominations by overstriking existing foreign silver and bronze coins.²⁸ A common theme on the obverse of the coin (Fig. 1) is the facade of a sanctuary, the Temple, with an inscription written in ancient Hebrew letters, "Jerusalem." The reverse of the coin displays a so-called *lulav* (myrtle, palm branch, and willow tied in a bundle) and *etrog* (citron fruit), which are used in the celebration of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot or Feast of Tabernacles, connected with the long wandering in the Sinai desert. The inscription reads, "Year 2 of the freedom of Israel." The coins have a clear and unambiguous message. This is an introduction of a new era with reference back to Jewish history, the long wandering through the desert and the Temple of Jerusalem. The language is Hebrew and there are no Hellenistic or Roman symbols.



Fig. 2. Antoninianus of Zenobia, AD 271-272 (© Copyright Andreas Pangerl, www.roman-coins.info).

This can be compared with two other rebellions at a much later date, in the second part of the third century. In 260 the commander Marcus Cassianus Latinius Postumus established himself as Roman emperor of Gaul, Britain and Spain and began to issue coins.²⁹ A coin from 262 shows Postumus on the obverse with the inscription “IMP C POSTVMVS P F AVG” (*Imperator Caesar Postumus pius felix Augustus*). The reverse shows Mars and the inscription “P M TR P IIII COS III P P” (*Pontifex maximus, tribunicia potestate IIII, consul III, pater patriae*). Postumus uses all the traditional titles of a Roman emperor, and even if he did not take any action at all to march on Rome, there is no evidence that he or his successors wanted to create a separate western empire. They placed themselves in the tradition of the Roman emperors, clearly underlining the universal claim of their rule within the Roman Empire.

The other example is Palmyra. The Palmyrenes, a conglomerate of Amorite, Aramaic and Arab groups, were never fully Romanised from a cultural point of view.³⁰ Their main god was the Babylonian god Bal, and their priesthoods were hereditary within a few families. They still retained their Aramaic language and Palmyrene script as a supplement to Greek and Latin. They also dressed differently and had their own customs. Politically the Palmyrenes retained a high degree of independence, maintained their own camel regiments and managed to keep the long frontier against desert Arabs peaceful for over 200 years.³¹ The Romans could only be satisfied, and Hadrian declared Palmyra a free city in 129. However, in the second half of the third century the Romans lost control of the eastern frontier. The Sassanid king, Shapur, launched an offensive deep into Roman territory, and the Palmyrene economy, which was dependent on the eastern trade in the Arabian Gulf and with India, suffered heavily. One of the leading citizens in Palmyra, Odaenathus, seized power. According to Petros Patrikios, a Byzantine historian of the sixth century AD, he sent a delegation to Shapur offering him gifts, but was

rejected (FHG 4.187), but no other sources mention this episode. Odaenathus now raised an army. First he defeated two imperial pretenders, Macrianus and Quietus, and in 261 he drove the Persians out of the Roman territory, restoring law and order in the eastern provinces. He was named "Restorer of the entire East". His name is also associated with the term "King of Kings", a title borne by the Persian kings; but it is possible that his wife, Zenobia, attributed this title to him posthumously.³² Even if he claimed the title, we have no indication that this should be regarded as a rupture with Rome and the Roman emperor Gallienus. Rather, it was a direct challenge to the Sassanid king. We do not know if Odaenathus had further ambitions within the Roman Empire or in the East as such. In 267 he was assassinated, and his wife, Zenobia, took over on behalf of her son, Waballathus. Of her ambitions there can be no doubt, and in 269 she had gained control of the provinces of Syria, Arabia and Egypt. When Aurelian started his offensive to re-establish the unity of the empire, the Palmyrenes issued a series of coins with the bust of Zenobia. A coin from 271-272 (Fig. 2) shows Zenobia on the obverse with the inscription "S. ZENOBIA AVG" (Septimia Zenobia Augusta) and Juno on the reverse with the inscription "IVNO REGINA", referring to the Capitoline triad, Iuno, Jupiter and Minerva. Corresponding coins were issued with a Greek text. There is no reference to the main Palmyrene god Bal and no coins bear a Palmyrene text. The coins are clearly in the Roman tradition, and they do not differ from issues with Roman empresses. These issues were a direct challenge to the rule of Aurelian as a Roman emperor. The prize was not an independent Palmyrene empire, but Rome itself.

The Palmyrenes are interesting to compare with the Jews. They too had their characteristics, but they had no problem in adapting themselves to Graeco-Roman culture, without compromising their own, which was a mixture of Arab, Hellenistic and Persian elements. In contrast to the Jews they seem to have been able to have several identities simultaneously. They could simply choose which identity to activate, and they were able to be pragmatic and opportunistic, changing their loyalty according to the political situation.

Even if many Jews were in fact well adapted to the Roman Empire and there were great differences between Hellenised Jews and their more orthodox compatriots, the Jews were unique in the ancient world when it came to identity and their inability to adapt themselves to other cultures. Of course, this had something to do with their monotheistic religion that developed especially after the Babylonian exile. To accept the gods of other people was to renounce Jahve. This had political consequences. Both the Jews and the Romans lived in a world where there was no separation between religion and politics.

Moreover, the sacred books of the Jews, gathered in what we call the Old Testament, have some special features compared to the sacred books of the pagan world. They contain both a historical narrative from Creation onward and prophecies about the future destiny of the Jews as God's chosen people.

They also have a strong eschatological perspective. This aspect was reinforced by the political development in Palestine, where the Jews lost their independence to foreign powers, first to the Persians, then to Hellenistic rulers, and later to the Roman Empire. The concept of a Messiah became not only a religious but also a political force. This corpus of sacred books was gathered and edited over the centuries, and also, at an early stage, translated into Greek for the Hellenised Jews who did not master the Hebrew language any longer. Already before the Romans entered the scene as the new dominant power, important parts of the Old Testament constituted a common property of the Jewish people, even if the final canonisation of the text took place during Roman rule. The sacred books of the pagan world were different. Most famous are the Sibylline Books housed in the temple of Capitoline Jupiter, later moved to the temple of Palatine Apollo by Augustus, closer to his own residence. Even if the core of the Sibylline Books was prophecies about the future, it was a future not fundamentally different from the present, and the books were not a common property of the Roman people as such and did not play the same role in shaping the Roman identity in relation to other cultures.

However, the importance of the sacred books must be seen in combination with the other characteristics of the Jewish culture, such as the Sabbath, circumcision and prohibition against eating pork, and the fact that the Jewish community was exclusive, but not under cover. It was visible in normal everyday life. Often this stirred tensions and even clashes with other groups. This again enhanced the Jewish feeling of distinctness and cohesion. The Jewish identity was not something created at the time of Moses, but it developed over the centuries from the Babylonian exile in confrontation with foreign rulers and other local communities in a dialectic process.³³

Now we can sum up in a schematic way some important points about Jewish identity compared to non-Jewish identities. As with all human beings, a Jewish identity too was above all related to the family and the kin. Thereupon follows:

1. The local Jewish community/friends.
2. The symbolic centre of the Jewish religion (the Temple in Jerusalem).
3. Other Jewish communities outside one's place of residence.
4. The local community.
5. The Empire.

The Jewish identity transcends family, class, the local communities and the empire, and it is also attached to one single symbolic centre, the Temple in Jerusalem, even after this was destroyed in 70. It is characterised by a very high degree of horizontal impersonal cohesion that even the Jewish high priesthood or elite was not able to control. The Jews share a common destiny with a historical purpose given by God. It is no easy matter to become a member of the Jewish community, if you were not born into it. The identity is exclusive

and singular, as the religion in itself, and you cannot compromise by adopting other identities. The sacred books are a common property of the Jewish people, and an important tool in maintaining this special Jewish identity. In case of revolt this very strong cohesion and feeling of only one identity could be utilised in mobilising the members with unique determination – not to call it fanaticism – even against military odds. Punishment could be regarded as part of God's plan.

This cohesion and feeling of only one identity has rightly been compared to modern nationalism,³⁴ even if language did not play the same role in Judaism, insofar as there were Jewish communities that were in fact Greek speaking and read the sacred books in Greek translation. You cannot choose your nationality; you are born with it. The problem the Roman Empire experienced with the Jews can be compared with the problem later European multinational empires experienced – and experience (Russia) – with the rise of nationalism; but it went beyond nationalism. Judaism was also an international brotherhood and possessed the ability to mobilise across borders. It can be compared with the development of modern Islamic fundamentalism in its recent confrontation with the western culture.

Non-Jewish identities were also primarily related to the family and the kin. Thereupon follows:

1. Patrons/chieftains/friends.
2. Local milieu.
3. Empire.

The non-Jewish populations are characterised by a very high degree of vertical or personal cohesion from micro to macro level. Networks outside your community are based on personal relationships even with the emperor himself. Another characteristic is the ability to have several identities. A multi-identity culture gives one a choice. One can choose one's destiny. The Roman identity is no threat to local identities.

In case of revolt the mobilisation of the members was very much dependant on strong leaders and their charisma and indeed also the prospects of military success. Severe punishment is to be avoided. The choice between revolt and collaboration is in many ways a pragmatic or opportunistic one, both for the leaders and their followers.

This division between two kinds of identities is of course a very schematic one, and it neglects the fact that many Jews were indeed well integrated into the Roman Empire. They were no homogeneous group. It also neglects the fact the Romans in their conflict with non-Jewish societies also met some kind of horizontal mobilisation at least in rhetoric, according to our sources. Arminius is called the "liberator of Germany", *liberator Germaniae* (Tac. *Ann.* 2.88). According to Tacitus, the Scottish chieftain Calgacus delivered the following speech in 83 before the battle against the Roman legions commanded by Agricola:

As often as I survey the causes of this war and our present straits, my heart beats high that this very day and this unity of ours will be the beginning of liberty for all Britain...

To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire; they make a desolation and they call it peace. Children and kin are by law of nature each man's dearest possessions; they are swept away from us by conscription to be slaves in other lands; our wives and sisters, even when they escape a soldier's lust, are debauched by self-styled friends and guests; our goods and chattels go for tribute; our lands and harvests in requisitions of grain; life and limb themselves are used up in levelling marsh and forest to the accompaniment of gibes and blows ...

That army (sc. Roman), gathered from races widely separate, is held together only by success, and will melt away with defeat: unless you suppose that Gauls and Germans, and even – to their shame be it spoken – many of the tribes of Britain, who lend their blood to an alien tyranny, of which they have been enemies for more years than slaves, are attached to Rome by loyalty and liking. Fear and panic are sorry bonds of love: put these away, and they who ceased to fear will begin to hate ...

In the enemy's own battle line we shall find hands to help us; the Britons will recognise that our case is theirs; the Gauls will remember their former freedom; the rest of the Germans will desert them ...

Therefore, before you go into action, think upon your ancestors and upon your posterity. (Tac. *Agr.* 32, translated by M. Hutton).

Once again, we do not know if Calgacus ever delivered a speech like that, but it shows that these kinds of horizontal ties were not alien to the ancients. It would indeed have been very surprising if only vertical ties had dominated ancient society, or any society. All societies display both vertical and horizontal social affinities depending on the situation. We also know of a revolt in Egypt in 172-173 under the leadership of a priest, Isidore, where the local population of the countryside in the Delta stirred up a serious uprising against Roman rule. The situation went out of control and the city of Alexandria was threatened. The Romans summoned reinforcements from Syria, but according to Dion Cassius, military means had to be supplemented with a careful strategy:

His strategy (sc. Cassius) was to damage the good relations they had with one another and to separate one group from another: they were so desperate and so numerous that he did not dare to attack them when they were united. So he got the better of them by setting them at loggerheads with one another. (Dion Cass. 72.4, translated by E. Cary).

The reasons for the uprising are obscure, but the revolt clearly shows horizontal affinities, whether they were social or “nationalist”. Egypt was indeed a very special province in the Roman Empire, and not just in administration and monetary system. There was also a deep social, cultural, ethnic and linguistic difference between the rural and the urban population.

It is not my intention to deny the existence of horizontal ties, but my point is that these ties among most of the populations in the Roman empire were not strong enough in the longer run to create an identity and a loyalty which could really challenge the vertical ones, in contrast to the Jews, who, when it came to major conflicts, were able to mobilise the population with a unique determination.

In societies with strong vertical cohesion and multi-identities the process of Romanisation can be divided into several steps, phases or levels, with much chronological overlapping:

Conquest/Domination

In the first phase the Romans used their military superiority, combined with diplomatic means exploiting local competition and struggles for power, to establish control.

Consolidation

During the consolidation phase the Romans often had to build up the infrastructure, and they experienced resistance and series of revolts. The subdued populations and their leaders simply had to learn the hard way that the Romans were able and willing to crush any resistance.

Adaptation

The question “What have the Romans ever done for us” is of crucial importance especially in this phase: firstly, the Roman ability to maintain law, order and peace, not only to the benefit of the Romans, but also of significant segments of the local population, and, secondly, the Roman willingness to share the fruits of the Empire. This adaptation phase is only possible in a multi-identity culture. Revolts might still occur because of a temporary weakening of the central authorities or their inability to maintain peace at the borders. For the rebels and their leaders it was a pragmatic choice.

Full integration

Over time, the population began to feel like Romans, not only the elite, but also the population as a whole. They began to speak one of the two official languages of the empire, Greek and Latin often at the expense of the local tongue, which was simply forgotten. Rebels were now ambitious commanders and their armies and the goal is Rome, *Caput mundi*.

Thus the Romans succeeded in creating some kind of Roman identity over time. Christianity, which inherited some of the characteristics of the Jewish religion, culture and communities, posed a new threat. The symbiosis of the Roman Empire with Christianity in the fourth century and the establishment of a strong, vertical, hierarchal religious organisation made Christianity an instrument of control, not horizontal mobilisation. This settled potential conflicts of this type in European history for several hundred years. Further, the Romans never lost their ability to have several identities. Roman identity never became singular and exclusive. They needed that characteristic in Europe after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and in the east, when the Arabs established their empires. The potential, which the Jews displayed, to call forth a massive horizontal mobilisation of its people against a common enemy, based on one single, shared identity, emerged again only with the rise of the national states in the nineteenth century.

Notes

- 1 I am deeply grateful to Richard H. Pierce, University of Bergen, for critical remarks and valuable suggestions.
- 2 Claudius' speech has partly been preserved on a bronze tablet found at Lyon (Smallwood 1967, 369). Tacitus' version is a paraphrase, but it does not change the contents of the speech.
- 3 Drinkwater 1989, 189-190.
- 4 Herman 1987.
- 5 Parke 1933.
- 6 Boardman 1980.
- 7 Müller-Karpe 1959.
- 8 Smallwood 1976, 120-124.
- 9 The Alexandrian writer and political leader Philon and his brother Alexandros, who gained a high position in the Roman administration, descended from a prominent and wealthy family in the diaspora.
- 10 Kasher 1992.
- 11 Grabbe 2002.
- 12 Chamoux 2003, 121-123.
- 13 Rajak 1984.
- 14 McKechnie 2005; Smallwood 1976, 138-143; Lange 1978, 255-260.
- 15 Smallwood 1976, 144-180
- 16 Smallwood 1976, 96-104.
- 17 For a discussion of the controversial issue on the date of the synagogue see: Rajak 2002; Fitzpatrick-McKinley 2002; Schwartz 2001, 215-239; Smallwood 1976, 133-138; Levine 2000.

- 18 Jones 1926, 22; Smallwood 1976, 220-250; Fitzpatrick-McKinley 2002, 77-86.
- 19 Jones 1926.
- 20 Leon 1960, 14.
- 21 Smallwood 1976, 187-200.
- 22 McKechnie 2005.
- 23 Fuks 1961; Smallwood 1976, 389-427.
- 24 Smallwood 1976, 289; 293-330.
- 25 Millar 1989, 145.
- 26 Smallwood 1976, 428-466.
- 27 Goodman 2003; Tsafirir 2003; Isaac 2003; Oppenheimer 2003; Abusch 2003.
- 28 Mildenberg 1984.
- 29 Drinkwater 1987.
- 30 Richmond 1963; Young 2001, 136-186; Seyrig 1950.
- 31 Millar 1993, 333; Bowersock 1983, 129.
- 32 Young 2001, 235-239.
- 33 Grosby 1999.
- 34 Grosby 1999; Millar 1989, 147.