

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Classics Student Work

Classics

10-7-2016

With Flaccus: A Conversation with Erich Gruen's Alexandria

Samuel P. Butterfass

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, spbutterfass@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/classics_students



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Butterfass, Samuel P., "With Flaccus: A Conversation with Erich Gruen's Alexandria" (2016). *Classics Student Work*. 2.

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/classics_students/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics Student Work by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

With Flaccus: A Conversation with Erich Gruen's Alexandria

By Samuel Butterfass

In 38 CE, Alexandria, the premier destination in Egypt, effectively under Roman control since Octavian's victory over Marc Antony, experienced some of the most intense rioting against the Jewish cohort that antiquity had witnessed up to that point. Philo, our main literary source for the extent of and the damage caused by the riots, an author born in Alexandria and also of Jewish descent ("Philo"), paints a gruesome image of the violence and destruction. For the purpose of conveying the brutality of the riots and finding our place in history, I would like to present the most damning excerpt from Philo's *In Flaccum*, his account of the riots and the events immediately preceding and following them. This excerpt comes after the Alexandrian Jews have been driven from their homes and confined to specific sections of the city. Philo writes:

Unable any longer to endure their privation, some [Jews] contrary to their former habits went to the houses of their kinsmen and friends to ask for the mere necessities as a charity, while those whose high-born spirit led them to avoid the beggar's lot as fitter for slaves than for the free went forth into the market solely to buy sustenance for their families and themselves. Poor wretches, they were at once seized by those who wielded the weapon of mob rule, treacherously stabbed, dragged through the whole city, and trampled on, and thus completely made away with the till not a part of them was left which could receive the burial which is the right of all ... Some ... discarded the weapons of slower action and took the most effective of all, fire and steel, and slew many with the sword, while not a few they destroyed with fire. Indeed, whole families, husbands with their wives, infant children with their parents, were burnt in the heart of the city by these supremely ruthless men who showed no pity for old for old age nor youth, nor the innocent years of childhood. And when they lacked wood for fire they would collect brushwood and dispatch them with smoke rather than fire, thus contriving a more pitiable and lingering death for the miserable victims whose bodies lay promiscuously half-burnt, a painful and most heart-rending spectacle" (339-341; transl. Colson, as below).

The acuteness and the attention to detail suggest that this rioting was uncommon or unprecedented. We also have what is likely the first Jewish ghetto in recorded history created

because of the riots. Philo describes the Jews being confined to specific districts within the city. It is not a pretty picture.

But far more important than the very minute details of what the riots in 38CE may have consisted of, how do we make sense of this today and what can be learned from it? These were the questions that I grappled with as a newcomer to classics at the beginning of this year.

To develop my own interpretation of these events, I must first expand on the views of previous scholarship. How do they make sense of this violent outburst? The prevailing opinion of scholars is as follows: the violence experienced by the Jews in Alexandria can be traced to a pervasive resentment for the Jews by the Greeks living in Alexandria and the Romans leaders' unwillingness to do anything to help them (Bell 7-8).

According to many scholars, there is a clear series of events contributing to and leading up to the riots. The narrative goes something like this. Although the Jews were initially able to depend on the Romans for stability in their way of life, Roman policy towards the Jews in Alexandria began to waver. This manifested itself in a tax on non-citizenship that targeted the native Egyptians and a large portion of the Jews in Alexandria. This new tax prompted Jewish Alexandrians to begin to seek full Alexandrian citizenship, enrolling large numbers of Jews as students in the gymnasium, which was the path to Alexandrian citizenship (Gager 44, Bell 1-2). And this in turn caused the Greek resentment of the Jews.

This explanation pairs well with Philo's presentation of Flaccus, the Roman governor of Alexandria in 38 CE. Philo recklessly asserts that Flaccus was ultimately culpable for the riots, attributing his refusal to do anything in response to the rioting as a hatred for the Jewish cohort as a whole. Philo notes the images of Gaius installed Jewish synagogues as well as Flaccus' decree, labeling the Jews aliens in Alexandria (*Flaccus* 327, 333). Prevailing scholarship largely

confirmed this view presented by Philo (Bell 7), that this was the work of latent anti-Semitism in Alexandria.

Erich Gruen's work, however, presents the events in a new light. In his volume, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans*, Dr. Gruen deviates from the popular interpretation of Jewish social and political standing in Alexandria, as well as the forces that triggered the Alexandrian riots in 38 CE. What especially stands out is the way that he is able to use historical evidence and circumstance with great precision to dissect the argument made by previous scholars.

He refutes Flaccus' and even the emperor Gaius's culpability for the riots. He notes that although Philo attributes to Gaius an "unutterable hatred for the Jews," anti-Jewish sentiment did not trickle down from the *princeps* and prompt the riots against the Jews in Alexandria as Philo suggests.

Dr. Gruen argues that Flaccus, although unable to stop the riots from breaking out, certainly was not the catalyst for them. He pays special attention to Philo's account of Flaccus and notes that "the most Philo can say is that [Flaccus] 'allowed' it," referring to demonstrations against the visiting Jewish king Agrippa and the statues of Gaius erected in the synagogues. He goes on to contend that Flaccus would have no endogenous incentive to strip Jews of their rights. He contends that the true source of the violent outbreak was a scheme by several Greek figures to demonstrate Flaccus' ineptitude for governance, for the purpose of having him recalled by Gaius (60).

Dr. Gruen's view absolutely requires us to reevaluate past interpretations. Has past scholarship inappropriately cast the Greeks as anti-Semites to explain the outbreak of these riots?

Dr. Gruen provides us with a new perspective, an entirely new mechanism for the riots that may have been overlooked, one that centers more around a political vendetta than any kind of racism.

While I ultimately agree with Dr. Gruen's explanation of the external forces responsible for the riots, and I proceed with all due respect, we must be skeptical to accept wholly his interpretation. In the style of Dr. Gruen himself, we perhaps may ask whether further reflection on these events is warranted.

Dr. Gruen makes an effort to deemphasize the tensions between Greeks and Jews over their status and privileges in Alexandria, and the role that this may have played in the rioting, instead ascribing the bulk of the social tension to the Egyptians and the Jews (63).

Dr. Gruen refutes the idea that a tax on non-citizens in Alexandria caused more Jews to seek citizenship, contributing to Greeks' disdain for the Jewish cohort. He highlights the ambiguity of the language used to denote the term "citizenship" in the famed Helenos papyrus (74), a petition to the governor from a Jew named Helenos dealing with exemption to Alexandria's poll tax roughly 15 years after the riots—and one of the main pieces of evidence regarding the citizenship issue (Barclay 50-51).

However, another scholar, John M. G. Barclay, offers another reading of the papyrus, arguing that it does serve as evidence of Greek and Jewish social tensions. Barclay's interpretation of Helenos' papyrus notes the visible redaction performed by a scribe, demoting Helenos, the author, from "Alexandrian" to "a Jew from Alexandria." Barclay explains that this could "signify the legal and political struggles which faced Jews of a higher social level over the following decades" (Barclay 51). While this certainly does not signify the tax that Dr. Gruen refuted with any amount of certainty, in my own interpretation it does suggest that there was a meticulous inquisition of Alexandrian identity. I argue that this contributed to the Greek leaders'

frustration and was considered in their clandestine decision to manipulate and overthrow Flaccus.

Additionally, consider the language of Claudius in his *Letter to the Alexandrians* (Tcherikover and Fuks, vol. 2, no. 153). Claudius not only tells the Jews “not to aim at more than they have previously had,” he also requires that the Jews remove themselves from the games in the gymnasium. Dr. Gruen disputes a common reading of this line, which suggests Claudius meant for the Jews to cease attempts to seek education and citizenship through the gymnasium. He argues instead that Claudius instead meant a physical removal of Jews from the gymnasium, to prevent the riots from again spilling over. I argue that, more than anything, this order by Claudius was in fact pertaining to the education of Jews in the gymnasium, an order that was with respect to the Greek Alexandrians who may have felt largely neglected or second-classed by a Roman authority that had more reverence for the Jews residing “in a city which [was] not their own,” as Claudius states in his letter.

In my view, there was indeed social discord between the Greeks and the Jews about who was an Alexandrian. Dr. Gruen makes clear that the Jewish cohort received special privileges under Roman authority. For example, the Jews possessed an “ethnarch, a *gerousia*, or both,” as he writes (Gruen 75). In many ways, the Jews were elevated. Roman authority respected their autonomy. This autonomy exercised by the Jews contributed to Greeks’ dispute of who could be identified as an Alexandrian. This may have manifested itself in issues regarding solid, Alexandrian citizenship as many scholars suggest (Bell 1-2, 10, Gager 44), or it may not have, but that need not make or break an argument that suggests discord about Alexandrian identity.

But perhaps the most compelling evidence for the struggle to define Alexandrian identity is latent in Philo’s text. Flaccus issued a decree that declared the Jews aliens in Alexandria

(*Flaccus* 333). I ask, if there was no tension regarding the social standing of the Jews in Alexandria, why then would a demotion of their status by Flaccus be one of the primary moves employed to quell the violence against them, to give the dissenters what they wanted so to speak? Why carry out such a personal attack on the Jews' identity as Alexandrians?

I argue this is because Flaccus recognized that much of the Greeks' animosity towards the Jews was rooted in the special privileges and autonomy that the Jews enjoyed in Alexandria. They possessed their own ethnarch, or *gerousia*, while in contrast the Greeks' own festivities, their clubs and sodalities, were stripped away under Flaccus' rule. Philo writes to this effect: "The sodalities and clubs, which were constantly holding feasts under pretext of sacrifice in which drunkenness vented itself in political intrigue, [Flaccus] dissolved and dealt sternly and vigorously with the refractory" (*Flaccus* 305). Essentially, the Jews were favored by this Roman ruler in Alexandria.

Flaccus' decree declaring Jews aliens in Alexandria was an attempt to distance himself and the Jews from their privileged status. It was an attempt to both appease the Greeks and the rioting Egyptians, to rearrange the social hierarchy and define clearly who was in fact an Alexandrian. Most importantly, this was not a malicious act as Philo asserts. In my interpretation, this was Flaccus' attempt to quell the rioters and prevent further destruction of the Jewish cohort. His attempt was ultimately in vain, and the riots continued, but it offered a glimpse into his intentions and the importance behind Jewish, Alexandrian identity.

The last piece of evidence I will consider is regarding the public flogging of members of the Jewish *gerousia*. Philo writes, "Then as they stood with their enemies seated in front to signalize their disgrace he ordered them all to be stripped and lacerated with scourges which are commonly used for the degradation of the vilest of malefactors ..." (*Flaccus* 343). Dr. Gruen,

presenting his case for the Egyptians involvement, mentions the flogging in this context and how it was normally reserved for punishing Egyptians, noting that it is evidence of their social and political standing in Alexandria, at the very bottom (63). However, I contend that this public display was an effort to appeal to the Greeks, not the Egyptians. It would not be very appealing to the Egyptians in a public display by the Romans to have members of the *gerousia* treated just as poorly as the Egyptians themselves were. However, publicly flogging those Jews, especially the Jewish leaders, and publicly punishing them as equal to the Egyptians would have pleased the Greeks in Alexandria in this context, who were frustrated with the Romans' special consideration of the Jews in Alexandria.

Analyzing the relationships between different groups in Alexandria is of paramount importance in understanding other instances where Roman, Greek, and other groups may have interacted during the time of the Roman Empire, as well as understanding how best to avoid violent outbreaks, akin to those witnessed in Alexandria, in the future. Dr. Gruen's analysis of the forces behind the riots gives us a platform to begin to do just this.

Dr. Gruen returned to a specific place in history and by reexamining ancient evidence reached a radically different view about the people living and interacting with each other in Roman Alexandria. While my view differs very slightly from Dr. Gruen's, it is only made possible with his scholarship. I think that the most important thing I have taken from my interaction with Dr. Gruen's work is that in so many areas of interpreted history, scholars need to still to be willing to revisit, and continue to strive for fresh conclusions. Erich Gruen does this with great care. I am grateful to have interacted with his work and see it affect my own, and I am honored to have been invited to speak here this evening.

Bibliography

- Alston, Richard. "Philo's 'In Flaccum': Ethnicity and Social Space in Roman Alexandria." *Greece & Rome*. Vol. 44. No. 2. (Cambridge University Press, 1997). 165-173.
- Barclay, John M. G. *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*. (Los Angeles: T&T Clark LTD, 1996).
- Bell, H. I. "Anti-Semitism in Alexandria." *The Journal of Roman Studies*. Vol. 31. (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1941). 1-18.
- Claudius. *Letter of Claudius to the Alexandrians*. In Victor A. Tcherikover and Alexander Fuks (eds.), *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*. Vol. 2. No. 153. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).
- Gager, John G. *The Origins of Anti-semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- Gruen, Erich S. *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- Philo. *Flaccus*. Transl. F. H. Colson, *Philo*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941).
- The Embassy to Gaius*. Transl. F. H. Colson, *Philo*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941).
- "Philo." *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*. Eds. Geoffrey Wigoder, Fred Skolnik, and Shmuel Himelstein. (New York: New York University Press, 2002). *Credo Reference*.