RISE OF THE IDUMEANS: ETHNICITY AND POLITICS
IN HEROD’S JUDEA

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1. Introduction

First century B.C.E. Judea was a cultural crossroads in which various ethnic groups mixed and mingled in close proximity, accommodating and adopting each other’s social norms and identities. The royal courts of John Hyrcanus II (67–40 B.C.E.) and Herod the Great (40–4 B.C.E.) were no exception. Both the Hasmoneans and Herod, who was himself of mixed Idumean and Nabatean lineage, established courts in which multiple ethnicities participated equally.

In the past, scholars have noted a few of the various ethnic groups active in first century Judean courtly society. For instance, scholars such as Menahem Stern, Seth Schwartz and Peter Richardson have all discussed the increase in the number of non-Judean high priests during the reign of Herod.1 Moreover, Jonathan Roth has discussed and analyzed the existence of officers within the Herodian army who may have been Italians.2 Finally, scholars such as Aryeh Kasher and Israel Ronen have analyzed the relationship between Idumeans and Judeans during the Second Temple period.3

Building on this foundation, in this paper, I will focus on two events in the career of Herod the Great that reveal the rise of Idumeans within the Judean royal court and their full integration into courtly society.

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This rise began with the appointment of Herod’s grandfather Antipas as στρατηγός, but it reached its pinnacle under Herod, who, as a member of this ἔθνος, promoted the careers of several of his fellow Idumeans. Fewer than one hundred years earlier, the Idumeans were a recently-conquered people experiencing assimilation and integration into the Hasmonean monarchy. However, as the test cases I will be discussing show, at the end of the reign of John Hyrcanus II, and during Herod’s regime, Idumean aristocrats and their power struggles moved from the local Idumean stage to national prominence within the royal court. As a result, one could say that Idumean power struggles became Judean power struggles, and the court whose capital was in Jerusalem became an Idumean monarchy. Indeed, if this analysis were to be correct, it would argue for a relatively rapid integration of Idumea and its inhabitants into the Judean ἔθνος—πολιτεία. Perhaps this rapid integration explains why, only one hundred years later, Idumeans became some of the most rabid and loyal defenders of the temple and Jerusalem during the Great Jewish Revolt.4

These test cases, therefore, help reveal a complex political reality, one in which Judeans, Nabateans and Idumeans as well as other Semitic people inhabited the same court as Syrians, Greeks and even Romans. They illuminate a melting pot of social identity and ethnicity, where ethnic background was less important than political loyalty, personal influence and administrative ability. In this sense, the Judean court of the later Hasmoneans and the Herodian court that succeeded it were truly Greco-Roman institutions, ideal allies and friends to the Roman State. We can now turn to the first test case, the rivalry between the Antipatrid family and the faction led by Malichos.

2. Malichos

As the Hasmonean dynasty expanded its territory, it began annexing regions that were populated by non-Judeans. According to Seth Schwartz, the Hasmoneans ruled these areas through native vassals or “friends” of the king.5 Idumea was one of these annexed territories,

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4 For Idumean defense of the temple during the Great Jewish Revolt, see Josephus, *B.J.* 5.358–6.92, 148.
5 Schwartz, "Herod", 70–72.