JEWS AND THE ROMAN ARMY:
PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES

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Scholars, including military historians, often project the conventions of Talmudic, or even modern, Judaism back into previous periods. This is particularly true in general assumptions about Jews in the military.
and Jewish attitudes towards the Romans. In discussing this issue, it is important to note that the meaning of the terms ‘Romans’ and ‘Jews’ is not always clear, and was used variously and loosely in antiquity as well as today. In addition, the terminology shifted over time. Much of ancient, and modern ethnic terminology refers to region or language, but not without ambiguity. When the Romans referred to Syrians, for example, they might mean the inhabitants of Syria, whether Greek, Aramaic or even Latin speaking, or they might mean anyone who spoke Syrian, even in the first century a common way of referring to Aramaic.

On the other hand, while ‘Roman’ could be an ethnic term, it also had a political meaning. We know of many Jews who had Roman citizenship, Herod, Paul and Josephus are only the most famous examples. Tiberius Julius Alexander was not only a citizen, but also held high rank in the military. He is often mentioned in our sources without any reference to his Jewishness, and almost certainly would have been called a Roman in some contexts. Josephus says he “did not follow in the religion of his country” but this might reflect a doctrinal dispute rather than an objective observation. In any case, Alexander’s lack of piety did not make him any less Jewish.

A Hebrew name is a good indicator of Jewishness in the pre-Christian period, but a Greek or Latin name certainly does not exclude the possibility. We know of many Jewish individuals with Greek and Latin names from the Talmud, the New Testament and inscriptions. Indeed, the Jewish catacombs in Rome, and elsewhere, are full of inscriptions with Latin names. We find many individuals in the Herodian, or Jewish royal, army who have Latin names. Examples are Rufus the commander of the Royal Cavalry, Volumnius a military tribune and Aebutius a decurion. The general assumption has been that they are ethnic Romans, serving in Herod’s army, and this is certainly possible. It is also possible, however, and in some cases more likely, that they are Jews with Latin names. While Herod and his successors certainly used Roman officers, we should not assume that there were no Jewish ones.

I. Shatzman, ‘The Integration of Judaea into the Roman Empire,’ Scripta Classica Israelica 18 (1999), 49–84.

2 AJ 20.100, see Turner (1954).
3 BJ 2.52.
5 BJ 4.36.