AUGUSTAN AND HERODIAN IDEOLOGY
HEROD, ROME, AND THE DIASPORA

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Abstract

King Herod, so it is usually supposed, was an important benefactor of Diaspora Jews. However many failings this flawed figure may have had, he could at least take credit for protecting and advancing the interests of Jews who dwelled (as they did in large numbers) in the Greek cities of the Roman empire. This posture by Herod is best exemplified by a famous episode in which the king joined the Roman imperator M. Agrippa, close friend and son-in-law of the emperor Augustus, in Asia Minor in 14 BCE. Complaints arrived there to Agrippa from Ionian Jews who lamented the restrictions imposed upon them by Greek cities in the region, restraints on their contributions to the Temple, their religious observances, and their civic privileges. Herod intervened vigorously and effectively at this juncture, commissioning a speech by Nicolaus of Damascus to defend Jewish prerogatives. Agrippa was persuaded, and reaffirmed the rights and practices of Jews in Ionia. Herod could present himself as safeguarding the interests of Diaspora Jews. The king returned to Jerusalem to boast of the gains he had made on behalf of the Jews in Ionia, thereby earning plaudits and favour in Judaea itself.

How far does this venture represent the ideological position of Herod—or indeed the image he sought to project? How representative, in fact, was it? Herod, as we know, was assiduous in the benefactions bestowed upon communities in various parts of the Mediterranean. His generous gifts included temples, gymnasia, theatres, public buildings, and endowments of all sorts for cities in Phoenicia and Syria, in Asia Minor, the Aegean, and mainland Greece. He certainly did not confine himself to the limits of his own realm in Judaea, Samaria, Galilee, Peraea, and Idumaea. An international presence was an integral part of Herod’s image. In this regard, it appears, he might be stepping into the shoes of Hyrcanus II. Hyrcanus had not only been named by Julius Caesar as High Priest and Ethnarch in Judaea but as leader of Jews generally, with implicit authority and responsibility for Jews in the Diaspora. Herod, it could be argued, carried on similar responsibilities with the endorsement and encouragement of Agrippa—and of Augustus behind him.

Yet the proposition needs more scrutiny. Did Herod employ his Roman connections to obtain favours for the Jews scattered in the Hellenistic cities of the East? How many of the places upon which he showered his benefactions possessed substantial communities of Jews? The image and ideology of Herod may have had a different orientation. He was ruler of Judaea, Samaria, and adjoining principalities. He was also a proud friend and collaborative client of Rome. But he projected the posture, perhaps first and foremost, of a Hellenistic monarch.

The Roman Empire in the Near East at the time of Augustus was a patchwork rather than a system. It constituted not so much an organised structure as a circuitry of relationships and dependencies. The influence of Rome manifested itself most conspicuously in provinces