



THE JEWISH DIASPORA IN PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN CYPRUS: SOME SPECULATIONS

Thomas W. Davis

Charles D. Tandy Institute of Archaeology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT

The presence of Jews on Cyprus during Ptolemaic and Roman rule, although attested by diverse historical sources, has not been convincingly identified archaeologically. However, the pottery style named Cypriot Sigillata A, may provide oblique evidence of the Jewish Diaspora on Cyprus, or at least its end. This paper will propose a causal relationship between two seemingly unrelated facts: the historically attested destruction of the Jewish Community 115–117 CE during the Diaspora Revolt; and, the sudden disappearance of Cypriot Sigillata A from the archaeological record by 150 CE.

I first met David Soren when I took a class in Cypriot Archaeology at the University of Arizona in 1984. During the semester, David expressed the need for an experienced excavator to direct a small team at the site of Kourion on Cyprus (Fig. 1). This was to be a subsidiary investigation to his main effort at the Temple of Apollo outside the city. I volunteered and excavated at Kourion that summer. Thanks to the success of that first year, a small-scale effort turned into a major excavation of a late Roman house (“the Earthquake House”) that I worked on for two years.¹ Ultimately, this taste of Cyprus led to my becoming the Director of the Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute (CAARI) in Nicosia, Cyprus from 2003–2011. My own project, the Kourion Urban Space Project (KUSP),² is a direct outgrowth of the Earthquake House excavation of the University of Arizona. Therefore it is with gratitude and pleasure that I contribute to this volume honoring David Soren.

The theme of this *festschrift* is Egypt and Rome. The Ptolemaic Empire was the last remaining major rival of Rome in the eastern Mediterranean. Cyprus was the main overseas province controlled by Ptolemaic Egypt and was a strategic asset of the first order. This makes Cyprus a small but important element in the complex interactions of Egypt and Rome.³ It is axiomatic that whenever rule over the eastern Mediterranean is politically divided, Cyprus gains strategic value from its location and dominance over the nearby sea lanes. The Ptolemies recognized this fundamental fact from the beginning of their Empire. From their main base at Nea Paphos, the Egyptian navy based on Cyprus maintained trade links into the Aegean and provided a constant irritation to the

naval forces of their main rival, the Seleucid state centered in Syria. Although these nations fought a series of wars throughout the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, the Ptolemies always managed to regain control over Cyprus, even if they temporarily lost ascendancy. By the 1st century BCE, Ptolemaic rule was well established and Cyprus did not have an independent voice in the civil wars of the last century of the Roman Republic. In 58 BCE, Rome, recognizing the strategic realities of the eastern Mediterranean, took control over Cyprus to enhance their dominant position in the region. Following the death of Julius Caesar, Cleopatra VII, understanding the importance of Cyprus for the survival of her nation, persuaded Marc Anthony to return the island to Egyptian control in 36 BCE, and she ruled the island until the Battle of Actium.

Scholars have long linked the beginnings of a substantive Jewish presence on Cyprus with the beginning of Ptolemaic control.⁴ The large Jewish population of Ptolemaic Egypt is amply documented by both contemporary historians and recovered papyri. It is a reasonable assumption that under the Ptolemies Jews came and settled on Cyprus. Jews fulfilled a number of economic niches in Egypt, including merchants and potters.⁵ A contemporary observer reports that as a result of a pogrom against the Jews in Egypt in 38 CE, “The capitalists (lit. ‘men of profit’) lost their deposits, and no one was allowed whether farmer, shipper, merchant, or artisan (*teknitai*) to practice his usual business.”⁶

After the Augustan victory, Rome made the island a separate province. The island lost its military importance with the elimination of the last independent nation



FIGURE 1: David Soren at the Temple of Apollo, Kourion, Cyprus in 1984.

bordering the eastern Mediterranean. The ancient sources are largely silent about the island during the Roman period; in Mitford's words, "In 22 BC Cyprus entered upon more than three centuries of tranquil obscurity."⁷ Inscriptions and coins together record only 48 proconsuls from 22 BCE to 293 CE, less than 1/6 of the total. The proconsul served for only a one-year term; Mitford points out that this short period of office prevented corruption. In consequence, Cyprus probably was not seen as an attractive posting for a young Roman aristocrat who needed to line his pockets to advance his political career; we know of only six governors who went on to become Consuls.

Nor did Cyprus attract ambitious military types; there was little scope for military glory in a province with no strategic value under Roman rule. The image of a province unified by Augustan *Romanitas* has provided the scholarly paradigm for most reconstructions of Roman rule on the island. However, an examination of recent archaeological discoveries relevant to Roman Cyprus suggests that the province was not as unified in the 1st century as previously thought. The elite of Paphos appear to have embraced elements of a separate cultural identity from the rest of Cyprus.⁸ Across the island conscious elements of a Ptolemaic identity were being retained, and historical evidence suggests Jews made up a substantial proportion

of the population during the first century of Roman rule over the island. The large Jewish population on the island, a legacy of Ptolemaic rule, would have helped promote a multi-faceted Cypriot identity in the first century of Roman rule. When this population was greatly reduced after the Diaspora Revolt was suppressed, Cyprus became more culturally unified.

Coinage from 1st century CE Cyprus provides clear evidence of contact with Judea, suggesting (although not requiring) a Jewish presence on the island. According to Danielle Parks, Judean coins make up nearly one-third of all 1st-century coins recovered from Cyprus.⁹ It was the only provincial issue originating outside of Cyprus that has been identified with any frequency. A coin horde (n=57) allegedly recovered from the Karpass Peninsula of northeast Cyprus contained only Judean and Nabatean coins. Parks suggests that perhaps provinces "may have been reluctant to accept foreign currency, and restricted circulation to issues from nearby and familiar provinces. In the case of Cyprus these would have been coins from the Syro-Palestinian region."¹⁰ Parks also credits the large Jewish population of Cyprus and presumed close relations between Cypriot and Palestinian Jewish communities for the coinage bias. In the High Empire there is only Judean coin recovered from the island. Of course the devastation of the First Revolt (66–70 CE) is a major factor in the

disappearance of Judean coinage, suggesting at least a loss of trading partners for the Cypriots even if they were not co-religionists.

P. W. van der Horst¹¹ and Z. J. Kapera¹² have independently reviewed the evidence for the presence of Jewish communities on Cyprus before 70 CE. Together these articles provide an excellent summary of historical and epigraphic data relevant to the Cypriot Jewish community. Although historical references are ample, current epigraphic evidence for a Jewish presence on Cyprus before the Diaspora Revolt is meager.

EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE OF A JEWISH PRESENCE

Kapera begins his recitation of the epigraphic evidence with three alleged Jewish names that are recorded on Phoenician stelae recovered from a cemetery in late classical Kition, perhaps late 5th or early 4th century BCE in date.¹³ Although van der Horst does not appear aware of these stelae in his 2004 survey of the epigraphic evidence, he does mention them in a later work.¹⁴ Both scholars agree that these names, (“Haggai,” “son of Azariah,” and “Asphyahu”) are Jewish and indicate a Jewish community on Cyprus associated with the Phoenician-dominated town of Kition.

In 1935, the University of Pennsylvania team excavating the site of Kourion on the south coast recovered a short inscription recording a single name from a secondary context during the excavation of the 5th century CE House of Eustolios. Mitford reconstructs it to read “AN Onias.”¹⁵ As Mitford states, “Onias is a name well known in Ptolemaic Egypt as that of a Jewish general of Kleopatra II and of the Jewish High Priest who built the temple at Leontopolis.” This identification as a Jewish name is broadly accepted and the inscription dated to the 2nd century BCE.

A contemporary Jewish epigraphic candidate is much more controversial. Nicolau reads an incomplete inscription from Amathus on the south coast as referring to a synagogue that he dates to the late Hellenistic period on paleographic grounds. It is very fragmentary, consisting of four surviving lines with a total of 22 legible letters. Nicolau states: “Though the text is very fragmentary we dare suggest with reserve that we may be concerned with an inscription concerning probably the construction of something of cedar under the archonship (?) of Ana[nias]?...The name Ananias *if the restoration is correct*, [emphasis added] is a Jewish name and our document may refer to the construction of some parts belonging to a *proseuche*, a synagogue.”¹⁶ The supposition of the presence of a synagogue is all based on the name of Ananias, a reading that has had to be reconstructed, and his possible role as an archon. No direct mention is made of a *proseuche* or a synagogue in the inscription.

Mitford supported Nicolau’s reading and removes the caveats saying that this inscription “appears to concern the construction in cedar-wood of a doorway of a synagogue at Amathus.”¹⁷ This leap of faith leads Kapera to say “the next attestation of Jews, also of the late Hellenistic or early

Roman period, comes from a text dealing with permanent habitation of Jews in Amathus,” and he follows this by quoting from Mitford approvingly.¹⁸ In contrast, van der Horst¹⁹ rejects the Amathus inscription as being much “too fragmentary” to support Mitford’s reading. I am forced to agree with van der Horst and remove this inscription from our consideration.

A horoscope from the time of Domitian may support the presence of a Jewish community at Tremithus in the center of the island. Recovered during the excavation of a well in 1913, the inscription is hard to read and may be a palimpsest. According to Mitford, the tenth line mentions the “6th of the Jewish month of Shebat.”²⁰

THE DIASPORA REVOLT

The Jewish presence on Cyprus during the first century of our era, a direct legacy of Ptolemaic rule, led to the inclusion of the island in one of the more brutal episodes in the relations between Egypt and Rome, the suppression of the Diaspora Revolt in 116–117 CE. The revolt was centered in Egypt, Cyprus and Cyrene. The suppression was the only recorded Roman military action on Cyprus before the 4th century CE. Historical sources are largely silent regarding this action. Dio Cassius records that legions sent from Syria and Pannonia crushed the revolt, resulting in more than 240,000 deaths on the island, particularly in Salamis (Dio Cassius LXVIII.32.2-3.) An early 2nd century CE inscription found in a secondary context in Beirut records the military career of a Roman tribune who led “a detachment of soldiers on a military expedition to Cyprus,” which can only refer to the Revolt.²¹ We lack a detailed account of this revolt, having no equivalent of Josephus, the superb internal witness to the First Jewish Revolt against Rome in Palestine.

Egyptian records, including papyri, indicate a massive destruction of the Jewish Community. With the exception of Alexandria, Jews vanish almost entirely from the papyri.²² Lands are confiscated, many left without owners.²³ Of course, the soils and climate of Cyprus do not provide the same survivability for similar documentation.

Archaeology may provide some collaboration of Dio Cassius’ account of the destruction of the Jewish Community on Cyprus. There is evidence for the rebuilding in Salamis and the restoration of a part of the gymnasium by the Emperor Trajan. An inscription²⁴ praising the Emperor Hadrian (“Benefactor of the Salaminians and Saviour of the World”) commemorates his important help towards the reconstruction of the city, which must have been necessitated by the revolt; there is no indication of any significant seismic activity in the early 2nd century CE on Cyprus. There may have been some contemporary damage to the Sanctuary of Apollo at Kourion, although the cause is not clear.²⁵

The Kourion Urban Space Project may also have exposed some evidence of the revolt’s destruction (Fig. 2). A small probe within Area A 4/5 space 32 sampled a fill that appears to terminate in the early 2nd century CE. The fill may represent cleanup from a localized destruction.



FIGURE 2: An early 2nd century CE ceramic deposit from Kourion Cyprus, possibly relating to the suppression of the Diaspora Revolt, Area A, Square 4/5, Kourion Urban Space Project.

This deposit was below an irregular plaster floor, suggesting that the material was hastily sealed over. The space continued to function, as a ceramic dump, well into the 3rd century CE.

Recent archaeological studies may provide indirect evidence of the impact of the destruction of the Jewish community on the island. Cypriot Sigillata A (CSA), a Roman-era fine ware primarily produced in the region of Paphos, is the dominant fine ware in southwestern Cyprus. Production dates from the 1st century BCE to the 2nd century CE. Lund reports that “part of the production was made especially for export.”²⁶ Lund summarizes the findspots of Cypriot Sigillata A outside of Cyprus, and his

evidence indicates a strong pattern of export to Palestine and Nabatea.

A possible explanation for such a biased distribution may be that the shippers or even the manufacturers of CSA consciously directed their trade to these areas. Lund suggests an orientation of export to the former “Ptolemaic commonwealth” may lie behind the export pattern, but admits the lack of material recovered from Alexandria is troubling. However, the export pattern may not have a shared Ptolemaic identity as its cause (Nabatea never was ruled by Egypt), but because they are areas of strong Jewish presence. It is possible that some or even the majority of CSA was produced by Jewish potters based near Paphos, continuing their craft that had been first established under Ptolemaic rule. Both Herod the Great and Herod Antipas had married into the royal Nabatean family, facilitating the relocation of Jewish families into Nabatean space, so the recovery of material from Petra does not rule out a Jewish orientation to the trade. However, it must be stated that we have no direct information about the ethnicity of the craftsmen or the shippers.

When the evidence for the decline of CSA in the archaeological record is considered, the possibility of a Jewish link to the production of this ceramic is strengthened. According to Lund, there is a “pronounced decrease after about 100 CE, and a dramatic one after 150” in the presence of Cypriot Sigillata A both in Cyprus and elsewhere.²⁷ The first drop off after 100 CE in mainland finds is probably caused by the destruction of the Judean market as a result of the suppression by Rome of the First Jewish Revolt. The annexation of the Nabatean kingdom by Rome in 106 CE and the subsequent dominance of the former Nabatean market by Roman-produced Eastern Sigillata

explains the post-100 CE decline in CSA exports to Petra. The falloff in export to former Nabatean territory indirectly supports the idea of CSA being seen by potential buyers as a non-Roman identity marker. David Soren commented on links between Roman Cyprus and 1st century Nabatea when he identified the capitals of the first century CE Temple of Apollo at Kourion as Nabatean in style (Fig. 3).²⁸

The dramatic drop in CSA in western Cyprus after 100 CE cannot be explained by external events. CSA was always a luxury fine ware, produced in relatively small quantities (in comparison, for example, to Eastern Sigillata) and therefore more vulnerable to a single historic



FIGURE 3: Nabatean-style capital from the partial reconstruction of the cella of the Temple of Apollo at Kourion Cyprus. The original capital is shown on the left column.

event such as the destruction of the kilns or the death of the potters. Lund suggests an otherwise unattested 2nd century earthquake as the cause of the disruption of ceramic production and export. Cypriot scholars are inclined to seek seismic explanations for disruptions in the archaeological record because of the long-standing history of seismic activity.

An alternative explanation is that the almost disappearance of Cypriot Sigillata A from the ceramic record after 150 CE is a product of the suppression of Diaspora Revolt. The great loss of human life recorded by Dio Cassius in the suppression of the revolt on Cyprus could easily have included a number of potters who were producing CSA, fatally impacting an already declining production. A thirty-year gap between the destruction of a postulated Jewish community of potters living near Paphos in the Diaspora Revolt and the resulting curtailment of production and the disappearance of the ware around 150 CE is easily explainable as the time it would take for the final production run to have been shipped before the Revolt, and after a suitable use-life,

become broken and be discarded, thus entering the archaeological record. If this scenario is correct, the elusive physical evidence of the Diaspora Revolt on Cyprus may have become more substantive.

¹ David Soren and Thomas Davis, "Seismic Archaeology at Kourion: The 1984 Campaign," *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus* (1985): 293–301.

² Thomas Davis, "A New Window on Byzantine Kourion," *Cahiers du Centre d'études chypriotes* 43 (2013): 103–116.

³ Benjamin Scolnic and Thomas Davis, "How Kittim Became Rome: Daniel 11:30 and the Importance of Cyprus in the Sixth Syrian War," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 127.2 (2015): 304–319.

⁴ Terence Mitford, "Roman Cyprus," in Hildegard Temporini und Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und*

- Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Bund II 7.2, 1285–1384 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980).
- ⁵ Victor Tcherikover and Alexander Fuchs, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 49.
- ⁶ Victor Tcherikover, “The Ptolemaic Period,” in Tcherikover and Fuchs 1957, 49.
- ⁷ Mitford 1980, 1295.
- ⁸ Thomas Davis, “Saint Paul on Cyprus: The Transformation of an Apostle.” in James Hoffmeier and Daniel Magary (eds.), *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, 405–423 (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2012).
- ⁹ Danielle Parks, *The Roman Coinage of Cyprus* (Nicosia: Cyprus Numismatic Society, 2004).
- ¹⁰ Parks 2004, 157.
- ¹¹ Pieter van der Horst, “The Jews of Ancient Cyprus,” *Zutot* 2003 (2004): 110–120.
- ¹² Zadislaw Kapera, “The Jewish Presence in Cyprus before A.D. 70,” *Scripta Judaica Crakoviensia* 7 (2009): 33–44.
- ¹³ Kapera 2009, 33. Neither the paleographic evidence nor the archaeological context is able to provide a firmer chronological fix. See Sophocles Hadjisavvas, Andre Dupont-Sommer, and Helene Lozachmeur, “Cinq stèles funéraires découvertes sur le site d’Ayios Georghios, à Larnaca-Kition, en 1979,” *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus* (1984): 101–116.
- ¹⁴ Pieter van der Horst, *Jews and Christians in Their Graeco-Roman Context: Selected Essays on Early Judaism, Samaritanism, Hellenism, and Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).
- ¹⁵ Terence Mitford, *The Inscriptions of Kourion* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1971), 133–134.
- ¹⁶ Ino Nicolau, “Inscriptiones cypriae alphabeticae Vii, 1967,” *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus* (1968): 72–85, 77 no. 8.
- ¹⁷ Terence Mitford, “The Cults of Roman Cyprus,” in Hildegard Temporini und Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 2204.
- ¹⁸ Kapera 2009, 33.
- ¹⁹ Van der Horst 2004, 115 n.25.
- ²⁰ Terence Mitford, “Further Contributions to the Epigraphy of Cyprus,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 65 (1961): 118 no. 18.
- ²¹ Number 3 in Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev, *Diaspora Judaism in Turmoil, 116/17 CE: Ancient Sources and Modern Insights* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 5–6.
- ²² See particularly the papyri discussed in the recent study by Pucci Ben Zeev (2005).
- ²³ Pucci Ben Zeev 2005, 54–71, papyri numbers 36 to 41.
- ²⁴ Terence Mitford and Ino Nicolau, *The Greek and Latin Inscriptions from Salamis*. (Nicosia: Department of Antiquities, 1974).
- ²⁵ David Soren, *The Sanctuary of Apollo Hylates at Kourion Cyprus* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987).
- ²⁶ John Lund, “The Distribution of Cypriote Sigillata as Evidence of Sea-Trade Involving Cyprus” in Stuart Swiny, Robert Holfelder, and Helena Swiny (eds.), *Res Maritimae: Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean from Prehistory to Late Antiquity* (Boston: Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute, 1997): 201–215, 207.
- ²⁷ Lund 1997, 207.
- ²⁸ Soren 1987.