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How Do You Know a Jew When You See One?
Reflections on Jewish Costume in the Roman World

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Recently I opened the American Wikipedia page for Josephus, to find a sculpture at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen at the top of the page, identified as “Josephus” [Fig. 1]. Soon I found that this bust appears in a broad range of Wikipedia articles on the first-century author, from French to Spanish, Arabic to German. Oddly, a different image, an early modern print, illustrates the Esperanto and Russian pages, and the Danish language article is unillustrated. This sculpture is well known and appears in a number of scholarly and popular publications as “Josephus.” Most recently, a guide to the excavations at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, written by noted archaeologist Eilat Mazar, contains a drawing of this “Josephus” portrait bust.

The bust was listed as “some unidentified Jew” in a 1925 Ny Carlsberg collection catalog. In 1930, Austrian Jewish art historian, biblical scholar, and follower of the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung, Robert Eisler identified this “Jew” as Josephus. Eisler embraced this identification, and it has mostly stuck, especially—but in no way exclusively—in antisemitic discourse. What is it that prompted the identification of this sculpture with the Jewish historian Josephus? It was certainly not his haircut or the styling of his facial hair, which are standard Roman fare. Rather, Eisler suggested a physiognomic reason, focusing on the unusually large nose of this statue. Since the Nazi era, this kind of racial interpretation is, of course, (mostly) out of vogue. We tend to
downplay physiognomic distinctiveness of European populations—and particularly of Jews.

What is perhaps most interesting about the Copenhagen “Josephus” is the way that a stereotype about large Jewish noses—not altogether out of place when Ashkenazi Jews are compared as a group with more Nordic populations—was retrojected into antiquity as a kind of racial type and ascribed to a bust that in fact does have a prodigious nose. The Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek long ago dropped the “Jewish” identification. It is likely not coincidental that Danish scholar Per Bilde already unpacked the underlying racism inherent in this identification in 1988, which today is mainly purveyed over the Internet (though not the Danish Wikipedia), and is no longer taken seriously by scholars.

In a similar way, assumptions about Jewish costume are often projected backward from the modern situation. This logic assumes that if Chasidim today, for example, dress distinctively, then Jews in antiquity certainly must have done the same. This is not just an “outsiders’” instinct. Contemporary pedagogic materials used in fervently Orthodox schools portray the biblical characters and the rabbis dressed as contemporary haredim. They follow on illustrations of Jews in medieval Hebrew manuscripts, an approach tacitly assumed in medieval Jewish literature.

Medieval scholars transformed a late antique text in Leviticus Rabbah (fifth–sixth centuries), which has it that the “redemption” of the Jews from Egypt was assured by four acts—that they maintained circumcision, Jewish names, Hebrew language, and did not engage in sexual improprieties. In medieval rabbinic sources, however, the foursome was transformed, “sexual improprieties” replaced with “their [distinctive Jewish] dress.” Medieval European Jews did, in fact, dress distinctively (often not by choice). In antiquity, by contrast, Jews did not dress distinctly. Nowhere in Philo, Josephus, rabbinic literature, or in visual culture is there evidence that Jews dressed in ways profoundly different from others. In fact, the overwhelming evidence is that they did not.

An excellent point of departure is a large stone funerary monument, dated to the first half of the fourth century. With a height of 1.81 meters, this tombstone was purchased in Pest in the 1830s or 40s and hails from this region—some have suggested ancient Aquincum, now a section of Budapest [Fig. 2]. The monument resides in the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest (where I examined it in 2007). The focal point of this architectonic, gabled monument is the image of a family, with the father to the right, the mother to the left, and a boy holding a bird before the mother. All are dressed in typi-
cal Roman garments, and the folds of the garments are clearly portrayed. The artifact has not been scanned for color, and no painted surface decoration is evident. Below, a smaller register presents a well-known scene in tombstones of this sort, a table at the center flanked by men raising their cups. A large panel below contains a Latin inscription that identifies the dead:

To the good memory of Claudia Maximilla, who lived 25 years, and of Domitio Domnionus who died in Retia, her husband, who lived 37 years. Aurelia Urbana and Ingenua [have erected this memorial] to their well-deserving sister.

There is no reason to think that Claudia Maximilla and Domitio Domnionus were Jews, nor that the mourners were either. The inscription mentions only this couple, and the boy of the portrait relief is unmentioned, not an uncommon situation in Pannonian funerary monuments. Sometime later the stone was acquired by another family, who added new inscriptions in a “Graeco-Latin”
script. The longest of these translates: “In Memorial of Anastasius and Decusanis (?) and Benjamin, their son.” Between the heads of the parents is a large menorah with a triangular base, and there are two more menorahs, on the chests of the son and the father. Near each of the family members appears the inscription *Eis Theos*, a Greek term used rarely by Diaspora Jews, more often by Christians. Through the addition of these three menorahs and three inscribed expressions of fealty to Judaism, a Jewish family in late antiquity was able to see itself in the images of a non-Jewish family that had died years before.

The only markers of Jewishness are to be found through these additions, which transform a non-Jewish artifact into this Jewish one, a non-Jewish family into Anastasis and Decusanis and Benjamin. David Noy, Alexander Panayotov, and Hanswulf Bloedhorn are quite correct that the literal translation of our text suggests a family of four. They translate: “Anastasius and Decusanis (?) and (et baneiami) Benjamin and our son (et feileio nostro),” a family of four, which would suggest that the Jewish mourners reused a monument with three images for a family of four.18 I would be more comfortable with this interpretation if it did not depend on the literacy of a carver writing Latin in Greek script, who could just as well have added *et*, “and,” before each noun. Either way, the costume and coif of the newly Jewish family portrayed on the tombstone are not altered. The Jewish family buried with this monument bore enough physical resemblance to the original polytheistic family commemorated that Jewishness could be superimposed—as kind of palimpsest—without any changes to the actual portraits.

Thus, Baruch Kanael is completely correct when he claims: “This is the only known Jewish group portrait on a grave stone of the Roman period.”19 Indeed, no other portraits of named Jews are extant from late antiquity, not even a palimpsest. Reflecting on the uniqueness of this tombstone, Leah Di Segni hazards that our monument, with its portraits, represents “an un-kosher mixture if ever there was one.” The presence of a Latin inscription written in Greek script (which might have been taken to be a traditional Jewish epigraphic language in the West, as it was) suggests a family deeply embedded in its own place and time, while still expressing Jewishness. While our stone does reflect a decision to decorate a Jewish tombstone with images of the dead, is this necessarily “un-kosher”?

Similarly with the expression of *Eis Theos*, “One God.” Rarely used in Jewish contexts, it is common among Samaritans and Christians. The trifold insertion of the menorah—undoubtedly painted, as the incision in the stone is very shallow—is the sure sign of Jewishness (or perhaps Samaritan-ness?). It
is the one God of Israel to whom this family—the parents with Greek names, the child with a biblical one—display allegiance. I am reminded, though, of the thousands of Jewish tombstones in twentieth-century Eastern European cemeteries adorned with photographs of the deceased—my own grandparents, buried in Rochester, New York, among them. “Un-kosher,” perhaps not. The *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael*, a mid-third-century Palestinian midrash, describes people—perhaps Jews—keeping images of their deceased parents with no adverse judgment:

> “Who does wonders” (Exod. 15:12).

The attributes of flesh and blood are not like the attributes of God. Flesh and blood goes to a maker of images and says to him: Make me a likeness of my father. He (the craftsman) says to him: Bring me your father and place him before me, or bring me his picture and I will make one like it. But He who spoke and the world was created is not so. He gives this man a son resembling his father from a drop of water (semen).

Such images were, of course, quite common in Roman times, the best preserved being a group of mummy portraits discovered in Egypt and along the Mediterranean coast. For Samaritans, however, our memorial stone might certainly have been “un-kosher”—at least in terms of what we know of rigorous Samaritan aniconism from synagogue discoveries in this period. Then again, if Samaritans did live in Pannonia (there is evidence of their presence in not-so-distant Dalmatia, modern Albania), they would have been a very, very small minority—otherwise unattested in this region. In such a situation, anything is possible. I point out that Samaritans today decorate their homes with images of their ancestors, while their synagogues are without human, animal, or mythological imagery. While mosaic portrayals of individuals do not appear in Jewish contexts in the land of Israel, images of biblical figures and the signs of the zodiac found in Palestinian synagogues do appear—as they do in Christian contexts—dressed as good late Romans.

The same may be said of the Dura Europos synagogue, completed ca. 244/5 CE. Images of biblical characters appear there dressed as either Romans or Persians in ways that are appropriate to the story being told. Thus, in the panels depicting Esther and Mordecai and the Valley of the Dry Bones, the biblical characters appear dressed as Persians, and in scenes not specifically related to Persia, Greco-Roman garments are used. This cognizance of the “difference” between Persian dress and “normal” Roman clothing likely reflects the reality of Dura itself—a Roman city on the Persian border. It particularly
reflects the makeup of the synagogue community, where Aramaic and Greek inscriptions predominate, but Persian language graffiti appears throughout. There is nothing “Jewish” about the garments of the biblical characters. In fact, a *chiton* similar to those worn by Moses, Elijah, David, and other characters, decorated with two vertical stripes, was uncovered in the Dura Europos excavations. It is my sense that these images of biblical characters project the garments worn by Jews at this time in the eastern Empire, including at Dura, into the biblical past.

One element of the paintings, however, does reflect a specifically Jewish costume. In the panel of Moses crossing the Red Sea and again in the image of Moses holding a Torah scroll, small strings hang from the corners of Moses’ toga [Fig. 3]. It has been suggested that these strings represent the ritual fringes, *tsisiot* (singular, *tsisit*), known from rabbinic sources to have been attached by at least some Jews of this time to the corners of their four-cornered garments in observance of Numbers 15:37–41.\(^{24}\) That the artists at Dura imagined Moses with fringes parallels rabbinic assumptions about the biblical heroes. Babylonian Talmud *Baba Batra* 73b–74a, for example, describes the Babylonian rabbi Rabbah bar bar Hannah on a trip in the Sinai desert, where he finds the remains of “those who died in the desert.” He unsuccessfully tried, we are told, to take a bit of the blue string from their ritual fringes.\(^{25}\)

A particularly humorous tradition preserved in a roughly contemporary Hebrew language text, *Sifre Numbers*, a mid-third-century Palestinian midrash, describes a student of the sages going down to the “cities of the sea” from some rabbinic enclave inland to visit the “most beautiful prostitute in the world.” Just before he could perform the act, his *tsisiot* flew up as “four witnesses [or, men] against him” and hit him in the face—souring the moment and shocking him to his senses.\(^{26}\) On a formal level, the strings of the fringes on Moses’ garment at Dura are related to an image in the Temple of the Palmyrenes. The specifically Jewish strings

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Figure 3. “Moses,” wall painting, Dura Europos Synagogue. Photograph by Fred Anderegg. From E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* [New York: Pantheon, 1964], 11, pl. v.
of Moses there are thus not out of place when viewed in terms of the belts of figures that appear in a wall painting called today the “Wall Painting from The Temple of the Palmyrene Gods of Julius Terentius Performing a Sacrifice” [Fig. 4].27 What is most fascinating, though, is the way that a typical Roman garment is judaized and that Jews at Dura wished to see Moses depicted with this Jewish detail visible—one that no Roman author finds sufficiently distinctive to mention as a Jewish peculiarity.28

How did you know a Jew when you saw one in the Greco-Roman world? Jews did not have any particular physiognomic qualities, unless perhaps when males were nude in a mixed group—and only then if other Semites and Egyptian priests, groups that also circumcised, were not present.29 Archaeological and literary remains are hard-pressed to provide the kind of nuanced distinctions for which this question calls. After all, insider knowledge of distinction may be incomprehensible to outsiders of any group. So, too, Jews. While their garments were just like those of everyone else, it is likely that only an insider would notice fringes like those of Moses at Dura; or the particular tip of a fedora that today informs any Jewish insider that the Orthodox Jew to whom they speak is a Chabadnik; or the knitted kippah balanced at the front of the denim, knee-length skirt that identify a Bnei Akiva-oriented modern Orthodox teen today; or the way that the color and size of a turban and beard have meaning for contemporary Sikhs; or the code that dictates the color (grey, black, or blue), styling, and fabric quality of a suit worn by Manhattan lawyers. This kind of nuance is invisible in the sources available to us for antiquity, but this kind of distinction was certainly very real—as it continues to be today.

Figure 4. “Julius Terentius Performing a Sacrifice,” wall painting, Temple of the Palmyrene Gods, Dura Europos. Photographs by Steven Fine.
NOTES

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephus
2 http://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josefus
3 For example, Robert Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1997), fig. 18.
5 Frederik Poulsen, *Katalog over antike skulpturer*, (Copenhagen: Nielsen & Lydiche, 1940), VIII 225 28/86, “Josephus Flavius’ Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, 646. The 1925 catalog was unavailable to me, and is cited from the 1945 catalog.
10 Frederik Poulsen, *Katalog over antike skulpturer*, op. cit.
13 This tradition appears across rabbinic literature. The first to notice this point was Solomon Buber, *Pesiqte de-Rav Kahana* (Leipzig, O. Schulze, 1885), 83b, n. 66. See also S. Lieberman, “Ḥazanut Yannai,” *Sinai* 4 (1939): 227 [Hebrew]; Samuel Safrai and Ze’ev Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1998), 133 [Hebrew].
14 See, for example, the articles by Flora Cassen and Asher Salah in this volume.
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18 Noy, Panayotov, and Bloedhorn, Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis 1.
19 My translation, “Es ist dies die einzige jüdische Bildnisgruppe auf einem Grabstein der römischen Verträge Period, die bisher bekannt ist.” Baruch Kaniel, Die Kunst der Antiken Synagoge (Munich and Frankfurt am Main: Ner Tamid Verlag, 1961), 70.
22 Noy, Panayotov, and Bloedhorn, Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis 1.