

Abstract

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Module: CLCL7005 / Methodology for the Study of Classics

Word count: 530 words (abstract) / 1 579 words (bibliography).

“Unsilencing” the queen?: taking an interdisciplinary look at the Hasmonean queen Salome

Alexandra (76-67 BC)

The rule of the long-forgotten Shelamzion (or, under her Greek name, Salome Alexandra), who ruled Judaea between 76 and 67 BC, has attracted an increasing amount of attention in recent years, most significantly the feminist scholarship of Ilan or Atkinson’s monograph (mis?)representing her as a warrior queen and the “greatest” of the Hasmoneans¹. Perhaps because of the lack of historical sources except for a few references in Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls, other studies (such as the Ph.D dissertations of Liebowitz and Patterson) have more or less convincingly sought to find the “real” Salome Alexandra behind the Biblical figures of Esther and Judith².

Although highly valuable, current scholarship remains thus limited, dominated by specialists of feminist or Biblical / Judaism studies and has mostly demonstrated why the queen had been “silenced”³ in ancient historical records. Conversely, existing studies of the role of royal women in the Macedonian, Ptolemaic, Seleucid or the Nabatean kingdoms consistently fail to include a discussion of the contemporary Jewish queenship of Salome Alexandra⁴.

In contrast, this dissertation therefore aims to “*un*”silence the queen and will provide a generalist, comparative and interdisciplinary portrayal of a fascinating figure. It will study the Hasmonean queen in the context of her times and exploit a wide range of historical, literary, Biblical as well as archaeological and numismatic sources.

¹ Ilan 2006 ; Atkinson 2012.

² Liebowitz 2011 ; Patterson 2002.

³ Ilan 2006.

⁴ Bielman Sanchez 2003 ; Carney 1991 ; Fantham 1994 ; Macurdy 1932 ; Perassi 2012 ; Savalli Lestrade 1994 and 2003. A (partial) comparative approach including the Hasmoneans can however be found in Schwentzel 2011 and Wilker 2016.

I will start by considering Salome Alexandra's place in the history of the Hasmonean dynasty and their Herodian successors: was she an "anomaly" (as Liebowitz has suggested and, as the virtual absence of reference to her queenship in studies of Hasmonean ideology or politics such as those of Bernhardt, Dabrowa or Regev, would appear to confirm?⁵) or was she, as I will argue, one of many powerful female members of the Hasmonean and Herodian families?. I will then examine what her rule tells us about the status of ancient Jewish women, elite as well as "non"elite. More importantly perhaps, the interactions between Judaism and Hellenism have long been debated⁶ but I will consider how the reign of Salome Alexandra mirrored the rise of women in the neighboring Hellenistic dynasties and what this teaches us about the Hellenization of the Hasmoneans?. Her diplomatic role, for instance her negotiations with the Armenian monarch Tigranes, will also be investigated.

Last but not least, a final section will be devoted to the reception of Salome Alexandra in the modern era, from the 1711 Latin work of Müller to Zeitlin's (severe) assessment of 1960 and her unlikely reemergence as a feminist icon since the 1990s, in both scholarship and fiction (for instance in a play of Donahue in 2003 or a 2012 novel by Petsonk)⁷.

⁵ Liebowitz 2011 ; Bernhardt 2017; Dabrowa 2010 ; Regev 2005.

⁶ See for instance: Gruen 1998 ; Hengel 1974 ; Levine 1998 ; Sartre 2001 ; Tcherikover 1959.

⁷ Donahue 2003; Müller 1711 ; Petsonk 2012 ; Zeitlin 1960.

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