

REVIEW

HEROD THROUGH THE EYES OF NICOLAUS

Kimberly Czajkowski and Benedikt Eckhardt, *Herod in History: Nicolaus of Damascus and the Augustan Context*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 208. Hardback, £65.00/US\$85.00. ISBN 978-0-19-284521-4.

The reign of Herod the Great is both a very popular and a misunderstood topic. This new book highlights two essential aspects (underlined by the title) that have hitherto remained in the shade: on the one hand, the main historical source on King Herod, Nicolaus of Damascus, and, on the other hand, the close ties between Augustus, Herod, and Nicolaus.

So far, despite brilliant attempts at rehabilitation (A. Schalit, *König Herodes* (Berlin, 1969)), Herod remains falsely perceived as an opportunistic murderer and arbitrary tyrant; and when, at best and most successfully, Herod's reign has been viewed from the perspective of the Roman Empire as a whole (E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh, rev. ed. 1973–9)), it is only on the scale of the specific history of the Jewish people, as a kind of regional level in the history of mankind, that it was envisioned.

The starting point of the authors of this book is to free this subject from the historiographical framework in which it is trapped, and to observe this kingdom as one of those which emerge in the space of the Roman East in the Augustan period, after the Pompeian conquest. Examining Herod's reign in this way and in the general context of the Eastern Mediterranean of the Augustan period directs us to read the sources with a new eye and to interpret the ancient historians of Judea in the same way as all other ancient historians, instead of considering them as a literature reserved for modern historians of ancient Judea. In this book, Nicolaus of Damascus, whose work was largely transmitted by Flavius Josephus, is thus studied as a Greco-Roman historian similar to other ancient historians, whose work tends to be merged with their life, since they are the most often embedded in the entourage of the princes.

As customary, Chapter 1 exposes the intents of the authors and their method, justifying the interest in Nicolaus of Damascus as a historian: this Syrian intellectual acquired a place of renown in Augustan Rome and had the merit of making known to his contemporaries what the Augustan world was really like on its Eastern periphery. Nicolaus' works feature the leading figures of the time, integrating them into the much larger framework of world history,

since his *Universal History* links the world of Herod, Augustus, and himself to those of Semiramis, Cyrus, or Gyges. This chapter summarises all the available information on Nicolaus of Damascus. Under cover of a simple rehabilitation of this little-known historian, the authors subtly assess the relevance of other literary sources existing on Herod, particularly Strabo and an enigmatic biographer known as Ptolemy. Overall, they review the ancient and recent approaches to Flavius Josephus, pointing out the limitations, if not the errors, of most of them. For example, they sum up clearly a long-standing and often confusing debate about the traditional distinction between what one can call 'two Flavius Josephuses', a young author who would have written *War* from a perspective favourable to Herod, relying on his predecessor Nicolaus of Damascus, and another older historian who in *Antiquities* would have deviated from his original ideas and source.

Among the rich discussions in this first chapter, we shall highlight two points rarely raised. Insofar as, according to ancient usage, the fragments of Nicolaus of Damascus integrated into the text of Flavius Josephus are only explicitly cited in rare and exceptional cases, the question arises of knowing how to distinguish a text from Nicolaus of Damascus from one written by Flavius Josephus himself. *Herod in History* effectively contributes to the discussion of the most tempting and seemingly the most indisputable method: the computer tool, the use of which brings the guarantee of scientific objectivity to a literary approach. But Czajkowski and Eckhardt show that this way does not give convincing results: indeed, studies of words are limited by the fact that, on the one hand, the corpus which remains of Nicolaus is not voluminous enough, compared to the phenomenal size of that of Josephus, to establish reliable statistics, and on the other hand, by the fact that Josephus was undoubtedly able to rewrite in his own words an episode he had found at Nicolaus. Let us add that the stylometric analysis, which is limited to vocabulary, essentially brings out a series of common terms, including the most common words, which are linking words. However, most of the fragments of Nicolaus were transmitted by the Constantinian *Excerpta*, which have been shown to considerably modify the presence or absence of particles. Specialists in fragmentary texts have shown that it is precisely at the margins of quotations that alteration of the original text was most frequent, because of the necessity of integrating the quoted fragment into the text which transmits it. Finally, it can be emphasised that, beside the fact that common terms, particles, and linking words are too ordinary to reflect a historian's own style, style—precisely—is defined not only by vocabulary.

Czajkowski and Eckhardt show their astuteness by addressing another point, the complexity of which makes it rarely debated: the dating of the *Universal History* of Nicolaus of Damascus. However, on this point, their argument seems to be more fragile: the authors rely on a passage from F 135 of Nicolaus' *Autobiography* to fix the completion of the writing of the *History* in

12 BC. In the context of this fragment, the expression ἐκ τούτου ('immediately after') indicates that Herod abandoned rhetoric from the date of 12 BC, to start immediately practising philosophy with Nicolaus. Devoting himself then to philosophy, the latter would have *de facto* abandoned history, which would make it possible for us to set the date he would have completed the writing of *Universal History*. But actually, nothing necessitates that by doing philosophy, Nicolaus abandoned history: the two disciplines of philosophy and history can be very close in Antiquity, especially for the Aristotelian School, which integrates historical treatises with philosophical activity. Rather, the capricious chronology of Herod's intellectual course is, if we follow the thread of F 135, to have started with philosophy, then abandoned it for rhetoric, and finally arrived at history, a discipline that Nicolaus the Peripatetic considered an annex of philosophy.

Chapter 2 analyses Nicolaus' historical method of describing Herod's rise to kingship. Czajkowski and Eckhardt first show that the historian had a genius for taking into consideration the lasting taste of the public for sensationalism and thus sought to attract readers of tales in which the poor become princes. Therefore Nicolaus tells of the accession to the prestigious throne of Judea of a character without any royal or priestly origin, an Idumean in addition. Then, Czajkowski and Eckhardt highlight another historiographical quality of Nicolaus', which is to remind the public of the absurdity of entrusting political power to sects, as the Hasmoneans did with the Pharisees, while, on the other hand, the country was lacking any Hasmonean leader able to take the leadership of the country at the time of the civil war between the successors of Alexander Jannaeus, his sons Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. Finally, in the frame of *Universal History*, Herod appears as a character whose exceptional destiny has many points in common with those of Cypselos and Gyges. This makes it possible to consider his biography with more hindsight and to approach the question of the ethnicity of Herod from a perspective which is not pejorative, since, for example, Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire, was a Mede by origin.

Thus, by taking into account the recurring themes of *Universal History*, Czajkowski and Eckhardt broaden the critical perspective and re-examine several Herodian questions that were previously considered as falsifications devised by Nicolaus of Damascus. One such is the Babylonian Jewish genealogical origin of Antipatros, Herod's father, which Nicolaus, as a good courtier, is supposed to have invented for Herod. As Jacob Neusner had pointed out before (*A History of the Jews in Babylonia I* (Leiden, 1965) 35–6), it is quite possible that Antipatros' family settled in Idumea on their return from Babylon and, after a regular social and political rise, moved to Jerusalem in order to serve the Hasmonean rulers. Likewise, Nicolaus' taste for prophecies, which are numerous in the *Universal History*, validates the authenticity of

Menahem's prophecy as a whole: Nicolaus had the Essenes predict the initial success of Herod, and then his downfall. In the *Universal History*, Nicolaus creates a model of an outstanding political leader, capable of putting an end to serious crises, as did Augustus and Herod, on whom the historian confers parallel destinies.

Chapter 3 deals with the euergetism of Herod. The theme is banal but unavoidable, and Czajkowski and Eckhardt renew it by approaching it from an original angle: they compare Herod's euergetism and the benefactor role played by Nicolaus in his personal life; and they also compare the treatment of the theme of wealth in the *Life of Augustus* by Nicolaus with Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, showing the moral and historiographical tradition in which Nicolaus is inscribed. According to Czajkowski and Eckhardt, one of the historical problems of Herod's reign is that, while the king conformed his actions to the principles of Hellenistic royalty, he received neither glory nor honour in return from his people. According to Nicolaus, the notion of *εὐνοια*, which implements a reciprocal system where the benefits of the king are rewarded with the dedication of his people (and *vice versa*), is extraneous to the cultural traditions of the Jewish people. As a *φίλος* of the king, the historian establishes a cause-and-effect link between Herod's unpopularity and the fact that his ruling methods were taken from the toolbox of a Hellenistic and Roman dynast, when the Jewish population knew nothing of this cultural toolbox and could not understand appropriately how it worked.

Chapter 4 begins with a fundamental question for the Augustan period: to what extent were the regions that were not yet provincialised free (and not just autonomous)? Did local rulers, like Herod in Judea, have a real autonomy under Roman rule? Believing that Herodian Judea can provide some answers to this debate, Czajkowski and Eckhardt consider the question by analysing several speeches made in *War* and in *Antiquities*. Apart from some pieces of evidence recalling that, according to traditional rhetoric, those speeches, written by Nicolaus, present the Roman Empire as a liberating force and insist on the crucial role played by Herod as a mediator between Rome and Jerusalem, the choice of the speeches studied is unclear and this chapter is a little bit confusing compared to the previous chapters.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the vast and thorny dossier of the royal family, which Czajkowski and Eckhardt have chosen to treat by separating the versions of the *War* from those of the *Antiquities*. Their analysis of the accounts of Mariamme's death in the two works is fairly unremarkable and adds little to the observations already frequently made, in particular the tragic appearance of the accounts and the numerous historical inconsistencies of the *Antiquities* (a proof of the fact that Josephus combines various sources to compose a longer and more complete account than that of the *War*). But the main point of Chapter 5 is to stress a historical pattern whose importance is

often underestimated: the persistence of a Hasmonean faction, led by Alexandra, Mariamne's mother, manoeuvring to dethrone Herod. This theme, where Mariamne plays a rather passive role in her mother's plans, explains her condemnation and announces the future weakening of Herod's power: finally, Mariamne and her mother are the victims of a political conflict between the king and his opponents; both queens must die for the kingdom of Judea to be preserved for the benefit of Herod and his successors. The trial and conviction of the two sons of Herod born from Mariamne, then of his eldest son Antipater, are quite consistent with the stereotypes of Hellenistic and Imperial successions, but this is not the aspect emphasised by Czajkowski and Eckhardt. Rightly, considering the different roles that Nicolaus of Damascus must play, they try to derive a definition of what a *φίλος* is: the personal behaviour of Nicolaus alongside Herod shows what a king had the right to expect from a *φίλος* and the place occupied by characters of this rank in the Augustan world.

As announced by the authors, the analysis in Chapter 6 uses F 136 from the perspective proposed by Mark Toher. From this, the reader will derive useful information because the situation around Herod is complex, particularly considering the schemes of his sister Salome and his brother Pheroras. But on the whole, this commentary is more paraphrasing than analytical. One would expect, for example, explanations of the reappearance of the Pharisees at this point in the story as well as of the actual social condition of the wife of Pheroras: can the king's brother really be the official husband of a slave? In this chapter, Czajkowski and Eckhardt seem to be trapped by the psychology of Nicolaus, as shown by the continuation of the text where the Damascene triumphs in trials of international scope such as that of the Nabatean Syllaios, when he sees the reinforcement of his status as the *φίλος* of the *princeps* while Herod's is crumbling.

Chapter 7 studies the religious opponents of Herod and sets out to show how Nicolaus and Josephus present the same scenes differently. This can be summarised by one example, which is—along with the Temple Eagle case—one of the most significant episodes in this regard: it concerns the Jerusalem theatre trophies case. This passage comes from Nicolaus and recounts a discussion between Herod and pious Jews who oppose the display of trophies in Jerusalem during the Games in honour of Augustus in 28–27 BC (Jos. *AJ* 15.272). After conducting negotiations, Herod has the trophies dismantled so that he proves that they are not pictures, but decorative branches. The episode shows Nicolaus' point of view about the distance which, among the Jews, separates the superstitious masses from the elite of Jerusalem, close to Herod and Nicolaus himself. Josephus, meanwhile, tells the same story, but continues it by taking another turn: Herod having, according to Josephus, misled the multitude (*AJ* 15.280), ten brave men place daggers under their clothes and go

to the theatre with the intention of killing the king. Their conspiracy fails, but Josephus' account turns the trophies affair into a heroic episode of Jewish resistance. The analysis of this episode shows how Czajkowski and Eckhardt interpret Josephus' historiographical method: without invalidating the core which goes back to Nicolaus and criticises Jewish stubbornness, Josephus reworks this existing tradition and transforms it into a story favourable to heroic opponents.

The Epilogue then follows, which seems mainly to conform to a chronological and factual logic. Now comes the death of Herod, which is recounted as the consequence of a long and disgusting illness. The very detailed account by Josephus is reminiscent of the infamous agony of Antiochos IV as recounted in 2 *Maccabees*. This intertextual effect challenges the widespread idea that Josephus could not have access to 2 *Maccabees*. There is no narrative by Nicolaus of Herod's last days, unlike the scenes from the pyre of Croesus and the death of Cyrus, although one would have expected him to take part in the event as Herod's φίλος as much as Herod's historian. This makes the conclusion of the book somewhat frustrating, even if the last pages subtly develop a historiographical reflection.

Furthermore, this book is remarkable for its bibliography, which is both critical and complete, discerningly selecting publications that are genuinely useful to the subject and eliminating, from among the overabundance of references, those that unnecessarily repeat each other without adding much, or that defend points of view without likely scholarly interest to historians, such as works of retrospective medical diagnosis and relativistic literary approaches. The book is also innovative in its method, which synthesises the literary and historical approaches to the subject and does not neglect any level of analysis, from dynastic micro-history to the global history of the Eastern Mediterranean.

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