

THE HERODIANS:  
A CASE OF DISPUTED IDENTITY  
A REVIEW ARTICLE OF NIKOS KOKKINOS,  
*THE HERODIAN DYNASTY*<sup>1</sup>

David J. Bryan

**I. Introduction**

At a time when there is a renewed interest in Herod, Nikos Kokkinos has recently offered a welcome study which seeks to present a social and family history rather than focus upon important individuals. In so doing, Kokkinos set out to fill what he perceives to be a lacuna in Herodian studies by looking at the story of the dynasty from beginning to end. Along the way he investigated the following subjects:

- the origins of the family;
- the social and political conditions of Idumaea in the 2nd century BCE;
- the strongly Hellenized ideology of Herod the Great;
- the complexity of his genealogy;
- the status of the members of his family in Roman Judaea after Archelaus' fall;
- the role of the dynasty during the first Jewish revolt;
- the centrality of the dynasty in the workings of the Roman Empire in the east;
- the gradual eclipse of Agrippa II;
- the transfer of Herodian power to the wider Greek world in the second century CE.

Kokkinos tackled these with the confidence of a classical historian who has an impressive knowledge of the main literary sources and the extant documentary evidence (epigraphic, papyrological, numismatic and archaeological). Scholars will appreciate in particular Part II, 'The

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (JSPS 30; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998).

Herodian Family and Social Structure', which is a detailed analysis of the 144 members of the family that are mentioned or implied in the texts and sources. Kokkinos engages fully with conflicting evidence, particularly in Josephus' writings, and puts forward various, innovative solutions (e.g. in respect of the sequence of Herod's marriages in chapter 8). However, my main interest was captured by the bold hypothesis that is presented in the first part of the book, namely that the Herodian dynasty had a Hellenistic Phoenician rather than Edomite background, and that this remained a dominating influence as the dynasty emerged and developed. Indeed, Kokkinos argues that even Agrippa I, who is thought to have adhered more seriously to Judaism than other Herodian rulers, did so primarily for diplomatic reasons.<sup>2</sup> In the first section of this paper I will outline the basis for Kokkinos' hypothesis. I will then offer a critique in which I shall refer to the other significant monograph that appeared around the same time, but which offers a quite different perspective on this dynasty and on Herod the Great in particular, namely Peter Richardson's *Herod. King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999).<sup>3</sup>

## II. The Herodians According to Kokkinos

### *Identity in Early and Late Hellenistic Idumaea*

Kokkinos offers a nuanced analysis of Herodian identity, which resonates with a modern understanding of identity, as complex and multi-layered: 'an individual like Herod could legitimately be characterized as *Phoenician* by descent, *Hellenized* by culture, *Idumaeon* by place of birth, *Jewish* by religion, *Jerusalemite* by place of residence, and *Roman* by citizenship' (pp. 28, 351). Vital to the development of this theory is (a) the portrayal of the region which became known as Idumaea as possessing 'a conspicuous socio-ethnic instability' in each of the main eras after the Exile (p. 47), and (b) the

---

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 290–91, 351; note that *OGIS* 418 is vital evidence, as are the four coins struck at Caesarea in 42 CE (pp. 297–98).

<sup>3</sup> A word should be added here about my use of Josephus in this paper. I agree with Shaye Cohen that where Josephus' interests overlap such as extolling the Flavians, authenticating the Jewish religion, and defending his own career, he can be seen to 'invent, exaggerate, over-emphasize, distort, suppress, or, occasionally, tell the truth' (*Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian*; [Leiden: Brill, 1979], 181). See also J.L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus* (Harrisburg: TPI, 2000), 11.

presence in it of Phoenician groups that crept slowly down the coast. Kokkinos outlines a complex process by which various races intermingled (pp. 40–45). Under the Hellenistic regimes, respect for the rights of foreign populations would have been advocated, and he imagines that ‘the maturity reached by Edomite occupation’ may have reached the point where there was ‘enough economic and political instigation for a separate province’ (p. 49). Idumaea stretched between Judah and Beersheba.<sup>4</sup> Internally, it was probably divided into three *τοπαρχίαι*, which in turn consisted of *κώμαι* — Western Idumaea had Marisa as its capital, Eastern Idumaea had Adora as its capital, and Jamnia was the capital of the Ashdodite territory (p. 61). Marisa was probably the administrative centre for the whole of Idumaea. With a population of about 200,000 people, Jews and Edomites were in the majority in the east, whereas in the west, the Phoenicians and Philistines prevailed.

Hellenization is rightly described by Kokkinos as a complex cultural phenomenon, consisting of the following traits:

- adoption of Greek coinage, names, institutions and Greek words
- adoption of Greek political practices, lifestyle, and literary, artistic and architectural ideas (p. 80).<sup>5</sup>

He argues that Hellenization began in Syria-Palestine in the Late Persian period before Alexander’s career, when it was carried by the Phoenicians. It accelerated in the Hellenistic period, but did not reach its peak until the end of Herodian rule — ‘from the Roman/Herodian period onwards the impact of Hellenism became fundamental’ (p. 81).

### ***Idumaea under the Hasmoneans and the Rise of the Herodian Dynasty***

Kokkinos argues that the origins of the Herodian dynasty are to be located in the western part of Idumaea, and that therefore their background is Hellenized Phoenician rather than Edomite, as has been traditionally thought. Jewish subjugation of Idumaea, Kokkinos suggests, only became a reality after 127 BCE under Hyrcanus I (p. 88), who followed a policy of compulsory conversion. The primary evidence is of course Josephus<sup>6</sup> and Ptolemy, the grammarian of Ascalon.<sup>7</sup> Recently Kasher argued that both are unreliable in their

<sup>4</sup> Here he cites Diodorus (19.95.2; 98.1; 99.1).

<sup>5</sup> He points out that these are exemplified in the story of Herodotus about a Scythian king called Scylas (4.78–80).

<sup>6</sup> *Ant* 13.257; 15.254.

<sup>7</sup> In *De Adfinium Vocabulorum Differentia*; cited by Kokkinos, 90–91.

description of what happened to the Idumaeans, especially since Edomites would already have been circumcised.<sup>8</sup> However, Kokkinos urges us to accept their evidence, pointing to the complex ethnic mixture that made up Idumaea and contending that what they referred to was the compulsory circumcision of the majority of Idumaeans in the west, namely, Hellenized Phoenicians (p. 90).

If such a conversion occurred, Kokkinos argues, then it could not have been wholehearted. Indeed, he thinks that the full assimilation of the Idumaeans did not happen until the mid-first century CE, as attested by their support of the first Jewish revolt.<sup>9</sup> Prior to this, they were constantly viewed by other Jews as suspect — ἡμιουδαῖοι.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he finds evidence that some defected when they had the opportunity. First, ‘a major revolt with the view of returning to the old Hellenistic order’ was attempted by Costobarus when the reign of Antigonos II, the last Hasmonean, ended in 38 BCE.<sup>11</sup> Second, in 4/5 BCE at Herod’s death, the veterans who settled in Idumaea revolted (pp. 93–94).

Jannaeus’ appointment of Antipas, Herod’s grandfather, as governor (στρατηγός; *Ant* 14.10) of Idumaea is regarded by Kokkinos as part of a policy of reducing the danger of insurrection in this province. One of the qualities that this man possessed was the ability to handle the multiracial society much better than ‘any Jew’, especially Jannaeus(!), could (p. 95). Antipas was probably based at Marisa, where he would have raised his sons Antipater, Phallion and Joseph I. Here he arranged the marriage of Antipater, his oldest son, to Cyprus, probably of the philo-Hellenic, royal family of Nabataea (p. 95), and from this union, three sons were born: Phasaël, Herod and Joseph II. Eventually Antipater succeeded his father as στρατηγός in the reign of Alexandra (p. 96). In 63 BCE after Pompey reinstated Hyrcanus II as high priest and ethnarch, Antipater moved to Jerusalem and established the first Herodian court (p. 97). In this period Antipater was financial procurator (ἐπιμελετής).<sup>12</sup> For extraordinary bravery in Egypt in 48 BCE,<sup>13</sup> Julius Caesar rewarded him by

<sup>8</sup> *Jews, Idumaeans, and Ancient Arabs* (TSAJ, 18; Tübingen: Mohr, 1988), 44–78.

<sup>9</sup> See Kokkinos, 92–93; *War* 4.243, 265, 273, 275–76, 278–79, 281, 311.

<sup>10</sup> See *Ant* 14.403.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ant* 15.253–58.

<sup>12</sup> *Ant* 14.127, 139.

<sup>13</sup> *Ant* 14.133–36.

appointing him as ἐπίτροπος, governor, of Judaea.<sup>14</sup> Caesar also gave him Roman citizenship, exemption from taxation and other honours.<sup>15</sup> All these privileges ‘were evidently also extended to Herod and strongly shaped the destiny of his remarkable career’ (pp. 98–99).

According to Nicolas of Damascus, Herod’s court historian, Antipater’s family ‘belonged to the leading Jews who came to Judaea from Babylon’. Josephus himself regarded this claim as unreliable, arising from Nicolas’ desire to please Herod.<sup>16</sup> For Kokkinos, Nicolas was plainly responding to the ‘handicap’ of the ‘non-Jewish’ background of the family (p. 102). ‘Jewish ancestors had to be sought far away from Judaea, precisely because it was impossible for Herod to claim local Jewish roots’ (p 101 fn 62). He also avers that, as a priest with access to the genealogical archives in pre-70 Jerusalem, Josephus must have had good reason to reject Nicolas’ claim (p. 103).

But what was the background of the family? Although Marisa should be seen as Herod’s ‘home town’ (p. 96), Kokkinos argues that the ultimate origin of the family was Ascalon, a town which had been handed over to the Phoenician Tyrians in the Persian period (p. 116). Here he calls upon the ancient Christian writers who linked the Herodians to Ascalon — Justin Martyr,<sup>17</sup> Sextus Julius Africanus<sup>18</sup> and Epiphanius.<sup>19</sup> The latter two in particular have the flavour of calumny about their tales, identifying Herod’s forbears as *hierodouloi* of Apollo in Ascalon.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding this, Kokkinos insists that the Ascalon tradition needs to be taken seriously, and offers various supporting evidence, including the following main points:

1) Herod’s extensive building programme in Ascalon included ‘baths, sumptuous fountains and colonnades’ and a palace (*War* 1.422; 2.98; *Ant* 17.231). As a counterpoint to the observation that Herod was a generous benefactor to well over 20 cities outside his territory, Kokkinos notes that he ‘possessed no royal palace in any Hellenized city other than Ascalon’ (p. 113).

<sup>14</sup> *War* 1.199; *Ant* 14.143.

<sup>15</sup> *War* 1.194; *Ant* 14.137; 16.53–54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ant* 14.9; see also 16.184–86.

<sup>17</sup> *Dialogue* 52.3.

<sup>18</sup> *Apud* Eusebius, *HE* 1.7.11–12; Kokkinos gives a translation on p. 107.

<sup>19</sup> *Panarion* 1.20.1.3–5; Kokkinos gives a translation on p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Little wonder that Schürer spoke of ‘spite and malice’ in relation to these versions of Herod’s background! See E. Schürer, (rev and ed G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black and M. Goodman), *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973–87), I 234 n.3.

2) The family of Mariamme, Herod's Hasmonean wife, was based in Ascalon during the period when Herod's marriage was arranged (pp. 114–15). Thus, he must have spent some time there!

3) There is evidence of links between Herod and the cult of Apollo (pp. 120–22). On some of his early coins Herod used the symbol of 'the tripod with lebes', which is derived from the Apollo cult (p. 122). He also rebuilt the temple of Pythian Apollo in Rhodes,<sup>21</sup> which shows that he 'honoured Apollo', who was after all the god of his patron, Augustus (p. 122). Finally, Kokkinos refers to the inscriptions at Delos<sup>22</sup> and at al-Mushannaf in the Hauran<sup>23</sup> as evidence that subsequent Herodians (Herod Antipas and Agrippa I) continued to venerate Apollo. Indeed the latter may refer to Apollo as πατρίος, 'the ancestral god' (ibid.). This last point, however, depends on a disputed reading.

4) He proposes a possible link between the coinage of the Herods and that of 2nd–1st century Ascalon (pp. 128–35). Kokkinos suggests that an unusual monogram on coins from Ascalon in the Seleucid period is 'a ligature of the initial two letters HR of the dynastic name "Herod"', perhaps deriving from the ancestor, Herod of Ascalon, mentioned by Africanus and Epiphanius (p. 130). He then argues that this monogram was adopted by Herod the Great on his coins in year 3 of his reign.

Having unearthed or 'rediscovered' this background, Kokkinos urges that we should not see the hellenizing policies of Herod (described on pp. 123–26), or his dynasty, as the fruit of a political design to show loyalty to Rome, or of 'euergetism', or of megalomania for buildings and honours. Rather, they arose from 'a deep-rooted attitude reflecting personal circumstances, that is the origins of his family from a Hellenized Phoenician environment' (p. 126). Kokkinos strengthens his argument by highlighting well-known heterodox practices of Herod, including the following:

- building temples and shrines to other deities besides Apollo, such as the Nabatean temple of Ba'al Shamim at Si'a which housed his statue (p. 137)
- his patronage of the Olympic games (p. 125)
- his construction of temples for Roma and Augustus in Caesarea Maritima, Sebaste and Panias (p. 351).

---

<sup>21</sup> *War* 1.424; *Ant* 16.147.

<sup>22</sup> OGIS 417.

<sup>23</sup> OGIS 418.

He concludes that Herod's 'official religion was evidently practised only for the sake of his relations with the Jewish people' (p. 350).

### III. Critique and Analysis

The strength of Kokkinos' study is its willingness to wrestle with the complexity of individual and corporate identity. Identity is indeed complex and multi-layered, especially in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic settings where people may need to find ways to inhabit different, often religiously constructed, 'worlds'.<sup>24</sup> When people are asked to interface with different 'worlds' they need to find ways that enable them to do so without compromising the integrity of their commitment to their 'primary worlds'. However, by following the hypothesis that Herod's primary world was that of Hellenism rather than Judaism,<sup>25</sup> Kokkinos' analysis runs the risk of an uneven analysis. While the complexity of Idumaea and the wider Roman Empire is fully explored, the analysis of Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism is somewhat monochrome. We know that Diaspora Jews of the period show a remarkable spectrum of responses to the prevailing culture — from cultural convergence (Artapanus, Ezekiel, *Aristeas*, Aristobulus and Philo) to cultural antagonism (*Wisd of Sol*, *3 Mac*; *Jos & Aseneth*).<sup>26</sup> In Palestine, a different dynamic would have operated, especially in those areas where Jews were in the majority. Even so it would be difficult to deny that an analogous, perhaps narrower, spectrum would have existed there. As Grabbe notes, 'influence from Greek culture continued apace under the Hasmoneans'.<sup>27</sup> Grabbe points in particular to the work of Eupolemus, possibly the envoy of Judas to the Romans: 'not only is his name Greek, but he also wrote in Greek and followed Greek literary conventions' (ibid.). Aware that this is the Achilles heel of his study, Kokkinos dismisses the idea of comparing Hasmonean Hellenization with that of the Herodians (p. 345). But, could Herod's 'hellenizing policies' be the outcome of being an ambitious Jewish leader at a time when the prevailing politics made it possible for him and subsequent members of his family to have significant contact with a wider, more complex world

<sup>24</sup> On the latter see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), chapters 1–4.

<sup>25</sup> Kokkinos cites Josephus here: 'the king admitted that he felt much closer to the Greeks than to the Jews' (p. 126; *Ant* 19.329).

<sup>26</sup> See J.M.G. Barclay's recent study *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora. From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> L.L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (London: SCM, 1992), 308.

than his immediate predecessors? To address that question, we need to engage with the question of Herod's Judaism at a deeper level than Kokkinos does, whose instinct is to regard every 'unorthodox' practice as evidence for the theory of the Hellenized Phoenicians, rather than as an opportunity to explore the possibility of the breadth of Judaism in this period.

### ***Herod's Background Reconsidered***

As we saw, Kokkinos argued that Herod's family became Jews as a result of the policy of forcible conversion of Hyrcanus I. Although both Ptolemy and Josephus<sup>28</sup> speak generally of all Idumaeans being subject to this policy, it is important to note that when the latter is more specific, he only identifies two cities where this policy was pursued — Adora and Marisa.<sup>29</sup> The impression is thus made that what was in fact a highly localised practice was extended in the popular memory to something more widespread. But, even if Herod's ancestors were from Marisa, the idea that they were compelled to convert does not hold up. As Richardson points out, 'the rapid rise of Herod's grandfather Antipas to a position of influence evidenced that the conversion was more voluntary than forced'.<sup>30</sup> The idea that Jannaeus perceived his need of a more diplomatic representative in Idumaea is entertaining, but no more.

Kokkinos is of course right that forced conversion would only lead to a 'half-hearted' Judaism that looked for the earliest opportunity to recant. However, there is no evidence that any of the early Herodians did so, even when they had the opportunity. In fact the evidence of such a return on the part of Idumaeans is very thin on the ground. The revolt of the veterans after Herod's death seems, contra Kokkinos, to have been in alliance with the revolt of Jerusalemites against Varus (*War* 2.72–79). Costobarus' earlier revolt is the only substantial evidence in support of Kokkinos, and it is odd that he fails to discuss the fact that it was Herod who opposed him. Did Herod do this simply to preserve his own power base? Or, did Herod also oppose Costobarus' defection from Judaism?<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ant* 15.254.

<sup>29</sup> *Ant* 13.257. Although Kokkinos made much of the ethnic diversity between eastern and western Idumaea, he glosses over the fact that Adora is in the east and Marisa is in the west.

<sup>30</sup> *Herod*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> See further the discussion of Grabbe, *Judaism*, 329–31.

Let me turn to discuss the question of Herod's background. In the writings of Josephus we hear of two different accusations made of Herod: 1) that he was a commoner, ἰδιώτης; and 2) that he was a half-Jew, ἡμιουδαῖος, because of his Idumaeen background. Conveniently both occur in the pejorative speech by Antigonus II to Silo, commander of the Roman army which besieged Jerusalem in alliance with Herod in 39 BCE.<sup>32</sup> They are two related, but distinct, charges. The first makes a statement about Herod's social status rather than about his Jewish credentials, and says no more than what Josephus explicitly says when he explains why Herod wanted Antony to execute Antigonus II in 37 BCE:

Antigonus was descended from kings while Herod was a commoner (Ἡρώδη ὁ ἰδιώτης) ... Herod, the son of Antipater came from a house of common people and from a private family (οἰκίᾳ ὄντα δημοτικῆς) that was subject to the kings. (*Ant* 14.489, 491).<sup>33</sup>

The second charge that Herod was ἡμιουδαῖος is interesting, and may provide the background to the invention by Nicholas of the family's alleged Babylonian Jewish ancestry. Richardson briefly discusses three possible ways of understanding this phrase.<sup>34</sup>

1) It was based on the belief that 'Herod's mother was not considered a true convert to Judaism'. However, Richardson discounts this simply because the idea that Jewishness was reckoned by matrilineal descent cannot be pressed back as far as this period.

2) It could mean that 'Herod was a "God-fearer", but was not a full convert to Judaism through baptism, circumcision, and sacrifice'. This, Richardson also discounts on the basis that Herod's Judaism had more to do with his grandfather than with him.

3) The third and most likely way of interpreting the phrase would be that it implied that insufficient generations had passed since his forebear's conversion for Herod to be considered as fully Jewish. Deut 23.7 speaks of allowing children of the third generation to enter the

---

<sup>32</sup> See *Ant* 14.403.

<sup>33</sup> This surely is also the gist of the jibe of the Galilean brigand before committing suicide when he upbraids Herod as εἰς ταπεινότητα. However, the phrase is ambiguous: Thackeray translates it as 'a low-born upstart' in *War* 1.313, whereas Marcus opts for 'meanness of spirit' in *Ant* 14.430. Similarly, this class distinction underlies the report of court gossip about Aristobulus, son of Herod and Mariamme, who 'was continually upbraiding his wife (daughter of Salome, Herod's sister) for her low origin (ὠνείδιζεν...τὴν ταπεινότητα), saying he had married a woman of the people (ἰδιώτιν)' (*War* 1.478). If this is reliable, then it bears witness to a class struggle between the members of the Herodian court who had Hasmonean backgrounds and those who did not.

<sup>34</sup> *Herod*, 52–53.

assembly of the Lord. Philo of Alexandria encouraged an inclusive reading of this torah (*On the Virtues* 108). But, there might have been debate about whether an inclusive or exclusive reading should pertain. On an inclusive reading Herod was fully Jewish. On an exclusive reading it is his children who can claim full Jewishness. It is interesting to note that *m.Sotah* 7.8 has a reference to the concerns of Agrippa I, Herod's grandson, about his legitimacy. However, this is more to do with his right to rule rather than with his right to regard himself as a Jew.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the third interpretation forms the most likely background to the charge made by Antigonus. Even so, it is significant that it is a charge which to my knowledge is only once made against Herod in either *War* or *Antiquities*, and that by a bitter Hasmonean opponent and rival. Evidently, his uncle Hyrcanus II, who betrothed his granddaughter Mariamme to Herod in 42 BCE, perceived Herod differently. Indeed, a good case can be made that Hyrcanus was far from a passive figure in all these events, and that the marriage was a deliberate ploy on his part both to bring Herod into the Hasmonean family and to forestall the threat posed by Antigonus.<sup>36</sup> Be that as it may, what is clear is that there is a distinct lack of vigorous controversy during Herod's life about Herod's Jewishness.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the likelihood is that during Herod's lifetime, his contemporaries would have reckoned him a full Jew. Confirmation of this is surely provided by the reference to him as 'an insolent king' who is not 'of priestly stock' in *Assumption of Moses* 6.2. As Grabbe points out, 'nothing is said about his being a foreigner or non-Jew'.<sup>38</sup>

I now turn to reconsider the specific traditions about the origins of the family. Kokkinos dismisses too readily the tradition of Nicolas of Damascus that Antipater's family derived from leading Jews who came from Babylon to Judaea. Grabbe notes that Josephus' argument is a double-edged sword: 'his own version could arise from a desire to slander the Herodian family'.<sup>39</sup> He also wonders why the tradition would be especially pleasing to Herod if it were not true, and goes on

---

<sup>35</sup> See Richardson's comment, *Herod*, 53 n. 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Herod*, 122.

<sup>37</sup> Richardson notes that if any charges are made of Herod in his lifetime, they are the murmurs of the ruling classes. See for example Herod's trial when he was governor, στρατηγός, in Galilee (*Ant* 14.165). The elite clearly resented the sudden rise the Herodians who 'had leaped into prominence and formed an alternative elite' in the space of 15–20 years (*Herod*, 110).

<sup>38</sup> *Judaism*, 323.

<sup>39</sup> *Judaism*, 323.

to suggest that it is possible that Herod's family were simply 'Jews who lived in the Idumean area'.<sup>40</sup> What both scholars miss, however, is the fact if the tradition did flatter Herod, then it implies that he aspired to a more 'pure' Jewish pedigree. Thus, it may tell us something about his commitment to Judaism. Equally, it could be tied into Herod's struggle with the snobbery of the former ruling elite. If his family were ex-Babylonian exiles, then the chances were that they had an aristocratic background since it was mainly the elite who was taken there.

Turning to the theory of an Ascalonite background, the strongest plank is the witness of Justin (*Dialogue* 52.3). The non-Jewish background of Herod is vital to Justin's apologia. However, it also seems to be part of the common ground held with his interlocutor, Trypho: 'For though you affirm that Herod ... was an Ascalonite'. Thus, Kokkinos may be right, especially in view of Justin's family background at Flavia Neapolis (Samaria), to suggest that something substantial lies behind the tradition (pp. 104–105). However, Kokkinos naively fails to ask if both Justin and Trypho simply picked up Jewish gossip that circulated after Herod's death and were trying to turn it to their advantage in the Jewish-Christian dialogue/polemic! Certainly, if the tradition were any more than gossip, then I would have expected it to feature in Josephus' accounts of Herodian origins. The apologetic and ideological motives that are so apparent in Africanus and Epiphanius make it impossible for me to take their evidence seriously.

Closer examination of Kokkinos' supporting evidence for an Ascalonite origin of the Herodians does not entirely help the case either. The thesis that Mariamme lived in Ascalon is built upon slender evidence. After the second defeat of Aristobulus II, he was exiled in Rome.<sup>41</sup> However, his widow does seem to have been permitted to live in Ascalon, with her sons Alexander, Antigonus II, Alexandra III and another unnamed daughter, as it is from here that Philippion removes Antigonus and his two sisters.<sup>42</sup> Mariamme was the daughter of Alexander and Alexandra II, daughter of Hyrcanus II, a marriage that seems to have been a failed attempt to patch up the differences between the warring Hasmonean parties. Mariamme could

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. I am reminded of those dreadful, but popular, reconstructions of British genealogies in which lowly families like the 'Bryans' are traced back to a Norman knight, even if through illegitimate offspring.

<sup>41</sup> *War* 1.174; *Ant* 14.97.

<sup>42</sup> *War* 1.185; *Ant* 14.126.

not have been much more than four years old when her father was executed in about 50 BCE at Pompey's orders (*War* 1.185). It is thus possible that she would have lived at Ascalon with her mother, Alexandra II and her unnamed grandmother. However, it is much more likely that Alexandra II and Mariamme went to live with the ethnarch Hyrcanus II in Jerusalem, who would have arranged the later marriage to Herod.<sup>43</sup> That said, if a wing of the Hasmonean family that was closely related to Mariamme, and her sons Alexander and Aristobulus, continued to have a residence in Ascalon, this may explain why Herod unusually built a palace in a city which lay outside his domain. This special privileging of Ascalon may underlie the gossip that is reflected in the dialogue between Justin and Trypho, which in turn fuelled the later calumnies attested by Africanus and Epiphanius.

Kokkinos' interesting discussion of the numismatic evidence should be seen against the background of the slender basis for an Ascalonite background for the Herodians. Granted that the tripod and ceremonial bowl were a common feature of Hellenistic worship, I wonder why they should imply that Herod was a devotee of Apollo in particular.<sup>44</sup> Richardson suggests that the image may refer to an incense tripod of the Temple in Jerusalem,<sup>45</sup> but admits that we have no evidence that the tripod was used in Jerusalem. He also notes that the tripod appears on other coin types struck by Herod with a shape more like the tripods found in Israel. Even so, he thinks 'the question cannot be settled'.<sup>46</sup> He may be right, but in my opinion, the context of the 37 BCE coin precludes Kokkinos' theory. It was probably struck at the time of his victory over Antigonus II and his return to Jerusalem. Given the sensitive timing, it is most unlikely that Herod would risk

---

<sup>43</sup> *War* 1.241; *Ant* 14.300.

<sup>44</sup> Pausanias mentions tripods dedicated to Apollo (3.18.7; 4.14.2; 9.10.4), Heracles (10.7.6) and Zeus (4.12.8–10). The Perseus web site is a fruitful place to see relevant coins (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/imbrow>). In all 51 coins listed under the 'Apollo' search, few utilise the tripod as an image! Hunting motifs — bow, arrow, and stag — are typical. For a coin with a tripod that is connected to Apollo, see Dewing 2217 (reverse; 4th century; Mysia). But the tripod also appears on Dewing 1795 (4th century; Athens) next to Athena. The tripod also has associations with imperial figures after Herod's time: e.g. Boston 1973.641 (73 CE), a coin of Vespasian, on which Pax extends her purse over a tripod. See also Boston 00.293 and 32.1198 for coins of Hadrian that feature him offering sacrifice on a tripod (134–38 CE); and Boston 32.891 for a similar image of Antoninus Pius (158–59 CE).

<sup>45</sup> See the brief note about this symbol in Richardson, *Herod*, 185 n. 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

alienating conservative Jewish people by trying to sneak an Apollonian image past them.



From *The Handbook of Biblical Numismatics*  
(<http://amuseum.org/book/>).

Finally, I should briefly comment on Kokkinos' interesting theory about the monogram 'TP' found on Herod's coins of 37 BCE. The questions raised are complex and impossible to resolve here. It does indeed look exactly like the monogram on the Ascalonite coins. But, as far as I am aware, it only appears on coins of Herod's third year, it is always placed on the right of the tripod and lebes, and it is always opposite LG (Year 3). Thus, Kanael's thesis is most plausible that it is a ligature of τρίτω ἔτει.<sup>47</sup> I await with interest the response of numismatic specialists — but conclude at this point that an Ascalonite link is far-flung and unnecessary.

### ***Herod's 'Heterodox' Practices Reconsidered***

Kokkinos' thesis is of course on its firmest ground when focussing upon Herod's 'heterodox' practices, particularly outside Palestine. However, it can only be sustained by ignoring or underplaying what Grabbe describes as 'cumulative' evidence that Herod considered himself to be a Jew and was regarded as such by the Romans.<sup>48</sup> In additions to the points already made, Grabbe cites the following considerations:

- Herod's respect for Jewish customs. Grabbe notes that even in the 'tirade' about Herod's quinquennial games, 'Josephus has to admit that this did not really involve a breach of Jewish law' (*Ant* 15.267–79).

<sup>47</sup> B. Kanael, 'The Coins of King Herod of the Third Year', *JQR* 42 (1951–52), 261–64. Richardson also discusses the monogram, and prefers the proposal of Meyshan than TR refers to Tyre, the place where the coin was minted (*Herod*, 211–13).

<sup>48</sup> *Judaism*, 364.

- Herod's requirement that Syllaeus, a Nabataean, convert to Judaism before allowing him to marry his sister, Salome (*Ant* 16.225).
- The scale of the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.
- The fact that the fortress at Herodium seems to have contained a synagogue.<sup>49</sup>

Kokkinos does indeed dispute most of these.<sup>50</sup> However, he is at his least convincing when he writes in a footnote 'the only benefaction of Herod to the Jews was the Temple' and 'even this was countered with an impressive building at Hebron' (p. 146 fn. 147). Not only does he conveniently ignore the fact that the Hebron construction was a memorial to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs over the Cave of Machpelah (*War* 4.530–33), i.e. those who worshipped the God of Israel, but he fails to acknowledge that Herod clearly intended to give the Temple a place 'on the international scene', which was in no way inferior to other cult centres.<sup>51</sup> This is borne out by the sheer scale of the project, the innovative development of the courts of women and gentiles, and to some extent by the developments at Caesarea Maritima. The new harbour would not only have increased economic expansion, but would have made it easier for Diaspora Jews (and 'God-fearing Gentiles') to visit Jerusalem for the festivals. Richardson is surely right to say: 'it is almost impossible to imagine that he wanted to undertake the work (*sc.* on the Temple) — or was able to get agreement from the priestly authorities — without a strong personal commitment to Judaism.'<sup>52</sup>

If Herod was genuinely committed to Judaism, that still leaves us with the challenge of knowing how to interpret the data that led Kokkinos to put forward the thesis of Hellenized Phoenician whose Judaism was a necessary diplomatic duty. Richardson may well be on the right lines when he gently rebukes our desire for 'consistency'. His own monograph offers a complex picture of Herod, which I find very

---

<sup>49</sup> Not everyone agrees. For example, Donald D. Binder thinks that the synagogue was a triclinium in Herod's time ('Herodium', <http://www.smu.edu/~dbinder/herodium.html>). The synagogue, in his opinion, was added to the fortress during its occupation by Jewish rebels between 66 and 73 CE, and is 'an example of the so-called Galilean-type synagogue, which features rows of benches along the walls and columns intervening between the congregation and the center of the hall.'

<sup>50</sup> For example, he regards the requirement of Syllaeus as a pretext on Herod's part to avoid 'a suspicious link with a dangerous man capable of causing political problems for Judaea' (p. 183).

<sup>51</sup> Richardson, *Herod*, 195.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

persuasive. Herod was devoted both to Judaism and to Augustus.<sup>53</sup> Richardson suggests that Herod may have thought that the temples of Roma in Caesarea, Sebaste and Panias simply extended the practice of offering daily prayers to God on behalf of the Emperor.<sup>54</sup> He notes that ‘Herod could probably have avoided participation’, but ‘his rationale was simple: the Augustan age required “piety” towards Augustus, and Judea must participate to attain its proper place’.<sup>55</sup>

With respect to the bequeathment of resources to build the temple of Pythian Apollo in Rhodes, Richardson argues that this was probably motivated by gratitude for help received there when fleeing to Rome in 40 BCE and for the fact that it was there that Octavian confirmed his kingship in 31 BCE.<sup>56</sup> Regarding Herod’s participation in the Temple at Si’a, Richardson rightly points out that Herod may have thought that the deity, Ba‘al Shamim, was an alternative name for the God of Israel. In any case, the timing of his help (32/31 BCE) ‘aimed to “normalize” relations with Nabateans following a period of conflict’.<sup>57</sup>

While Richardson cogently points to a potential plethora of political and diplomatic aims that may explain some of Herod’s ‘heterodox’ practices, he may well have put his finger on one that stands out — the well-being of Diaspora Jews. During his reign ‘Jews at a distance from Judea benefited from Herod’s closeness to Rome.’<sup>58</sup> Rather than simply being the happy by-product of Herod’s links with the Roman imperial court and senate, Richardson thinks that a case can be made for a deliberate policy. A vital piece of evidence is the fragmentary inscription *CIJ* 173 from Rome, which may refer to a *SYNAGÔGÊ TÔN HÊRÔDIÔN*.<sup>59</sup> If it does, then it may imply a sense of gratitude felt by the Roman Jewish community towards Herod as ‘a beneficent figure who advanced the conditions of the Diaspora’.<sup>60</sup>

Richardson argues that Herod helped Diaspora Jews in two ways: ‘sometimes directly — as in the suit of Ionian Jews and his visits to

---

<sup>53</sup> *Herod*, 186.

<sup>54</sup> *Herod*, 184–85.

<sup>55</sup> *Herod*, 194.

<sup>56</sup> *Herod*, 192.

<sup>57</sup> *Herod*, 193.

<sup>58</sup> *Herod*, 265.

<sup>59</sup> *Herod*, 209 and 267 n. 25.

<sup>60</sup> See Richardson’s fuller discussion of what is far from a settled discussion — *Herod*, 267–68; and also J. Goodnick Westenholz ed., *The Jewish Presence in Ancient Rome* (Jerusalem: Old City, 1995), 23–27.

substantial numbers of Jews — but mostly through benefactions.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, he thinks it is no coincidence that the Roman decrees which safeguarded the conditions of life in the Jewish Diaspora<sup>62</sup> are confined to almost entirely to Asia Minor and the adjacent islands, precisely the areas where Herod's largess was most apparent. Through strategic gifts in places like Rhodes, Cos, Chios, Nicopolis, Pergamum, Samos, Athens and Sparta, 'Herod aimed to improve the attitudes of Greeks and Romans towards the local Jewish minority'.<sup>63</sup> Clearly more evidence would be welcome (though it may never be available), but it seems to me that Richardson's instinct has guided him to a key area of Herod's strategy outside Palestine, which goes a long way to explaining the more 'heterodox' policies and practices, noted by Kokkinos, that make Herod (and his dynasty) so extraordinarily difficult to assess.

#### IV. Conclusion

By calling for a complex multi-layered understanding of individual and corporate identity, Nikos Kokkinos has moved forwards the study of the Herodian dynasty, and of Herod in particular. However, in his perplexity over their openness to Hellenism, he has elected to explain the dynasty as consisting of characters whose Jewishness was superficial. The theory of a Hellenistic Phoenician background of the family lacks substantial support. But whether they came from this ancestry or not, a willing conversion to Judaism on the part of Herod's immediate progenitors should not be doubted. The hypothesis that the Herodians were Hellenists in Jewish clothing is not really needed if Kokkinos' subtle description of Idumaea can be set alongside a three-dimensional understanding of Jewish identity, both in Palestine and in the wider world of the Roman Diaspora, and if with Richardson due allowance can be made for the complex role of the Herodians in the emerging world of the Augustan Empire. Without minimising the complexity of the evidence available to us, Herod and many of his subsequent dynasty make good sense as liberal, politically hard-headed Jews who recognised that for Jews to operate and to survive in the wider world of *Pax Romana*, diplomatic concessions were needed towards the Empire and its polytheistic cultures.

---

<sup>61</sup> Richardson, *Herod*, 272. On the Ionian suit, see *Ant* 16.27–60.

<sup>62</sup> See *Ant* 14.190–264; 16.160–73.

<sup>63</sup> *Herod*, 272.