

“The Call of the Discus”: Jews as a Minority in Egyptian Gymnasia A Case Study*

Meron Piotrkowski

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7359/1506-2024-piom>

It is necessary for us to speak at some length. I submit, then, that the Council will see to it that none of those who are liable to enrolment for the poll-tax [the *laographia*] diminish the revenue by being listed in the public records along with the *epheboi* for each year; and it will take care that the pure (?) citizen body of Alexandria is not corrupted by men who are uncultured [ἄθροεπτοι] and uneducated [ἀνάγωγοι]. (CPJ¹ 2.150)

1. INTRODUCTION

The above-cited quote is the beginning of the so-called “*boulē*-papyrus” (CPJ 2.150), a heavily mutilated papyrus from the Fayum dated tentatively to the years 20-19 BCE. In it, an unnamed Alexandrian Greek spokesman expresses the wish to the Alexandrian city council, the *boulē* (βουλή), to keep the Greek community undefiled from any foreign influence. Who are these “uncultured and uneducated” men who try to wrangle a tax-

* This paper was given at the international Conference *ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑ Ε ΓΙΝΝΑΣΙ ΙΝ ΕΓΙΤΤΟ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΤΙΚΟ Ε ΡΟΜΑΝΟ* at the Università degli Studi di Pavia on 30 September 2022 under the title “The *gymnasion* as a Cultural Liminal Space: Some Papyrological and Epigraphical Evidence on the Jews of Egypt and Cyrene”. This contribution is a slightly altered version of the paper presented at the conference. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to Profs. Silvia Bussi and Livia Capponi for inviting me to speak at their conference.

¹ *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* [henceforth: CPJ], edited by V. Tcherikover, A. Fuks, and M. Stern, Cambridge - Jerusalem, Harvard University Press - Magnes Press, 1957-1964, 3 vols., 2, pp. 25-29.

reduction by cheating themselves onto a list of members of a gymnasium (or gymnasial alumni)? Some scholars have suggested that they must have been Jews, as did, for example, the editors of the CPJ². Jews, in fact, as Tcherikover himself noted, are not mentioned here at all³. Why then, cite this document?

It is precisely the notion that an Alexandrian Greek takes issue with “foreigners”, i.e., “non-Greeks” – may they be Jewish or not – who unrightfully infiltrate the echelons of Greco-Alexandrian society by placing themselves on par with *ephebes*, who obviously enjoyed a higher (Hellenistic) education in the gymnasium⁴. Not only does this document convey a sense of anxiety on the part of the Alexandrian Greeks, it also links this anxiety explicitly to the institution of the gymnasium. Accordingly, there were members of society who *could* and were eligible to partake in Greek education in the Egyptian gymnasium, while there were others who could not, at least from the perspective of (some?) members of the Alexandrian Greek society, the “in-group”. This evokes the question how and in what form minority groups and local ethnicities, such as Jews, were, or could be, involved in Egyptian gymnasia? Were Jews in Egypt perceived as “uncultured and uneducated” men like those mentioned in the papyrus as Tcherikover claimed? Were they considered an “out-group”? And if so, why and when were they barred from the gymnasium?

Minority participation in ancient gymnasia is a topic that has not gained much scholarly attention⁵. When it comes to Jewish participation in the world of the gymnasium, the issue is commonly discussed at the backdrop of the Jewish struggle for civic equality (in particular the acquisition of Alexandrian citizenship), and the ancient “clash of civilizations” – Judaism vs. Hellenism. Studies on the latter issue mostly focus on an inner-Jewish perspective, in other words, they present the angle of what ancient Jews thought of other ancient Jews who were involved in the gymnasium and its implications for Jewish identity(ies) in antiquity, for which First and Second Maccabees usually serve as base texts⁶. The other

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³ “Although the Jews are not explicitly named, the anti-Semitic background of the document is quite clear” (*ibid.*).

⁴ On the Ephebes, their standing and function in the ancient gymnasium, see M.C.D. Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity in Ptolemaic Egypt*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 97-98, 175-181.

⁵ See also *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

⁶ See e.g. R. Doran, “Jason’s Gymnasium”. In *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins Presented to John Strugnell on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by H.W. Attridge, J.J. Collins,

issue, namely the question whether or not Jewish membership in gymnasia went hand in hand with the granting of citizenship, either as citizens of a Hellenized *polis* in post-Jason reformed Jerusalem, or as Alexandrian citizens in the later Roman period, is a more politically orientated question that seeks to explain the deterioration of Jewish/non-Jewish (Alexandrian-Greek) relations particularly in the first century CE⁷.

While the first set of studies basically discusses sources attesting Jewish participation in the gymnasium on a *cultural* plain, the other set of studies is more concerned with *politics*, and more practical reasons for Jewish participation in the gymnasium (e.g. the granting of Alexandrian citizenship). The first set of studies, as noted, mostly focus on First and Second Maccabees, which relate events linked to Judaea in the Hellenistic period, while the focus of the second set of studies is more on texts and documents – mainly papyri – from Roman Egypt. Thus, when looking at the body of sources scrutinized in both scholarly approaches, one will notice two divides: a chronological and a geographical divide. Another thing one will notice is that while Jews were able to participate in the world of the gymnasium in Judaea (and most probably in Egypt as well) in the Hellenistic period, problems with Jewish participation in gymnasia appear to arise in the Roman period only. However, our evidence for this observation comes entirely from Egypt, while our sources fall completely silent with respect to Jews in the gymnasium in Judaea. Was the gymnasium founded by Jason dissolved in the wake of the Maccabean revolt, or was it still active in Roman Judaea? We are, unfortunately, lacking the evidence to offer a conclusive answer to this question⁸. This is all the more reason to direct our attention to the evidence from Egypt, where Jews

and T.H. Tobin, New York, University Press of America (College Theology Society Resources in Religion, 5), 1990, pp. 99-109; S. Honigman, “The Charge of Impiety against Jason in 2 Maccabees’ Description of the Setting Up of the Gymnasium (2 Maccabees 4:7-17)”. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the European Association of Biblical Studies – EABS (Thessaloniki, August 8-11, 2011), pp. 1-10; K. Bringmann, “Gymnasion und griechische Bildung im Nahen Osten”. In *Das hellenistische Gymnasion*, herausgegeben von Daniel Kah und Peter Scholz, Berlin - Boston, Akademie Verlag, 2004, pp. 323-334; A. Kasher, “The Jewish Attitude to the Alexandrian Gymnasium in the First Century A.D.”, *American Journal of Ancient History* 1 (1976), pp. 148-161.

⁷ V. Tcherikover, “Prolegomena”, CPJ 1, p. 48; A. Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: The Struggle for Equal Rights*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1985; J. Méléze-Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt: From Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 161; Bringmann, “Gymnasion und griechische Bildung”, pp. 329-333.

⁸ See also Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, p. 102.

were fully integrated in the cultural, social, and political sphere in the Ptolemaic period, a situation that changed, however, and was no longer a given after the Roman takeover.

Gymnasia are generally considered champions of the promotion of Greek/Hellenistic culture⁹. However, many of the sources under scrutiny here – Jewish and non-Jewish – deem Jewish involvement in the gymnasium quite negative. The gymnasium thus became a cultural liminal space with respect to the local Egyptian-Jewish population. Why would a culturally inclusive institution like the gymnasium (or rather its custodians) limit access to the very culture it (or they) sought to promote, and how can we explain this? What factors were at play here?

This paper explores whether we can explain this change through the chronological and geographical divide just mentioned, and how Jewish involvement in the gymnasium was perceived not only by Jews, but mainly by non-Jews? What happened when Jews crossed the cultural liminal threshold into the world of the gymnasium?

In order to shed some light on these questions, I will draw on a variety of sources and source material, ranging from literary, epigraphical, to papyrological sources, from different geographical (Judaea, Egypt, and Cyrene) and chronological settings (Hellenistic and Roman periods). This dossier of sources, limited though it may be, comprises of Jewish and non-Jewish sources and therefore provides us with both an “insider” and an “outsider” perspective. As we will discover, the picture presented here is far more complex than meets the eye. We will discover that not only non-Jewish sources are hostile toward Jewish involvement in the gymnasium, but so are a few Jewish sources. At the same time, some non-Jewish sources display a neutral, if not outright positive outlook on the Jewish involvement in Egyptian gymnasia. I will discuss seven sources in all: three literary sources¹⁰, one epigraphic source (an inscription from Cyrene)¹¹, and three papyri¹². Apart from First and Second Maccabees, which were written in the Hellenistic period, all other sources originate from the Roman period.

I will argue that different geographic and chronologic settings can explain the exclusion of Jews in Egyptian gymnasia. I will also show that Jewish involvement in gymnasia (in Egypt, as well as in Judaea) was

⁹ See also *ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰ 1 and 2 Maccabees (1 Macc. 1:10-15; 2 Macc. 4:7-17), and a passage from Josephus' *Judean War* (BJ 2.489-498).

¹¹ CJZC 6, 7a + c (see also *infra*, n. 27).

¹² CPJ 2.151, 153; 3.519.

contested by Jews, as well as by non-Jews. Gymnasia were organized and functioned differently in different regions: in the Ptolemaic period, gymnasia were located in Egyptian villages *and* in *metropoleis*, while in the Seleucid empire, gymnasia were exclusively found in cities (*poleis*), including Jerusalem¹³. Similarly, by the Roman period Egyptian gymnasia were solely located in large *metropoleis* while its numbers declined with time¹⁴. The Egyptian gymnasia experienced a shift from a more *culturally inclusive* to a more *politically exclusive* institution; there was no longer any space for Jews, and members of other minorities¹⁵. However, Jews never ceased to attempt participating in the world of the gymnasium, but were forced out by local officials (perhaps also based on pressure by the local population/elites). Some Jews exhibited a staunch unwillingness to submit to the efforts of barring them from any involvement in the gymnasium. This triggered some unforgiving reactions by non-Jews, whenever Jews attempted to overstep this boundary, as we will discover in due course.

The aim of this paper is to contribute something to our knowledge about Jews and Jewish involvement in the ancient gymnasium in Egypt on the micro-level, while it also seeks to contribute to the study of minorities in Egyptian gymnasia on the macro-level, with the Jews serving as a case study. It is my hope that this inquiry will generate other studies on minorities in Egyptian gymnasia.

We will begin with the Books of the Maccabees and the evidence from Hellenistic Judaea.

2. “THE CALL OF THE DISCUS”: THE JEWS AND THE GYMNASIUM IN JERUSALEM IN THE HELLENISTIC ERA

The first contact of Jews with the gymnasium that we are aware of in our sources is reported in First and Second Maccabees. 1 Maccabees is a book written in Hebrew, which has only survived in Greek translation, by an anonymous Jewish author, presumably in Jerusalem, who was a

¹³ On these important insights, Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, pp. 3, 69, 114, 136-137; and R. Crihiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 35.

¹⁴ Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, p. 233.

¹⁵ “It is with the new order given by the Romans that the gymnastial community became first a social class and subsequently a completely closed and exclusive group” (*ibid.*, p. 243).

partisan of the Hasmonean court¹⁶. It records the dynasty's early history and their exploits during their struggle for Judean independence from Seleucid hegemony. One can narrow down the book's composition date to sometime during the reign of John Hyrcanus, i.e., approximately from mid to late second century BCE¹⁷. Right at the beginning of the book, at 1 Macc. 1:10-15, its author draws a picture of pre-revolt Jerusalem. He also describes the, in his view, abominable Greek habits eagerly adopted by the Jews that pinnacle in the establishment of a gymnasium in the city and the abandonment of Jewish ancestral customs.

[10] Out of them there emerged a sinful growth, Antiochus Epiphanes (the son of King Antiochus), who had been a hostage in Rome, and he began to reign as king in the 137th year of the kingdom of the Greeks. [11] In those days there emerged out of Israel wicked men, and they seduced many, saying: "Come let us make a covenant with the Gentiles who are around us. For since the day we separated from them we have been visited by many troubles". [12] This proposal found favour in their eyes, [13] and some of the members of the people volunteered and went to the king, and he gave them the authority to act according to the customs of the Gentiles. [14] *So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to customs of the Gentiles.* [15] *They made themselves foreskins, deviating from the sacred covenant and yoking themselves to the Gentiles; they sold themselves to the doing of evil.*¹⁸

Although the author of 1 Maccabees clearly protests this development, he only dedicates one sentence to the issue and moves on to other things. The author of 2 Maccabees on the other hand, an abbreviated Jerusalemite version of a larger composition comprised of five books likewise dedicated to the Maccabean revolt, originally written in Egypt by a Cyrenian author at around the same time as 1 Maccabees, provides a more detailed account of the events¹⁹:

(7) When Seleucus passed away and the kingdom was taken over by Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes, Onias' brother Jason corruptly usurped the high-priesthood (8) by promising the king, in a petition, 360 talents as well as another 80 talents of other revenue. (9) *Additionally, he promised to sign*

¹⁶ See "Introduction". In D.R. Schwartz, *1 Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New Haven, Yale University Press (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries), 2022, pp. 1-64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁸ 1 Macc. 1:10-15 (emphases mine); Schwartz, *1 Maccabees*, p. 109. See also Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 12.240-241.

¹⁹ On 2 Maccabees, see "Introduction". In D.R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter (Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature), 2008, pp. 3-97.

over another 150 talents, if he would be allowed to found, on his own authority, a gymnasium and *ephebeion* and to register the people of Jerusalem as *Antiochenes*. (10) When he got royal approval and took control of the government, he immediately brought his co-religionists over to the Greek style [...]. (12) With relish he laid the foundations for a gymnasium directly beneath the acropolis, making the strongest of the *ephebes* submit to (wearing) sunhats [or “Greek hats” M.P.]. (13) And there was such an apogee of Hellenism and inroad of foreignism due to the extreme impurity of that impious and unhigh-priestly Jason, (14) that the priests were no longer enthusiastic about the altar ministries. Rather, in their disdain for the Temple, and in their lack of concern for sacrifices, they hurried to participate in the lawless distributions in the palaestra which followed upon the call of the discus; (15) considering the ancestral values to be worthless, they considered the Greek honors to be the best. (16) For this reason, they were overtaken by a difficult state of affairs, and those for whose ways they were enthusiastic, and whom they wanted fully to imitate, became their own enemies and nemeses.²⁰

Like the author of 1 Maccabees, the author of 2 Maccabees too, clearly condemns the introduction of the gymnasium into Judean society; but he is also explicit about setting the foundation of the gymnasium against the background of a cultural/religious antagonism between “Judaism and Hellenism” – *Ioudaismos* vs. *Hellenismos*²¹. In other words, Jewish participation in the gymnasium is viewed, in Jewish literary sources from the Hellenistic period, as pejorative, and going against Jewish ancestral customs. The gymnasium and Greek *paideia* pose a threat to Jewish society, its religion, and its customs²². However, 1 and 2 Maccabees also attest the enthusiasm exhibited by some Jews in joining the gymnasium, if we choose to attach credence to these perhaps exaggerated accounts. It follows that for others, embracing the “Hellenistic way of life” embodied and promoted by the gymnasium, was not all that menacing. We may assume the same being the case for the Jews of Egypt. One must add that, at least on the face of it, First and Second Maccabees leave us with the notion that

²⁰ 2 Macc. 4:7-17 (emphases mine); the translation is taken from Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, pp. 207-208.

²¹ M. Himmelfarb, “Judaism and Hellenism in 2 Maccabees”, *Poetics Today* 19 (1988), pp. 19-40; R. Doran, “Paideia and the Gymnasium”. In *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, edited by K.M. Hogan, M. Goff, and E. Wasserman, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature Press, pp. 135-151.

²² Kasher, “The Jewish Attitude,” pp. 148-161; Himmelfarb, “Judaism and Hellenism”, esp. pp. 24-26; Honigman, “The Charge of Impiety”, and Id., *Tales of High Priests and Taxes: The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochus IV*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014, pp. 92, 190, 199-217, who interprets the gymnasium in Jerusalem as an “anti-Temple”.

whoever ran the gymnasium in Jerusalem, were fellow Hellenized Jews, who were not members of the “foreign” Greek ruling class as in the Diaspora. The gymnasium in Jerusalem was an institution run by Jews, for Jews and, although sanctioned by their Seleucid overlords²³, open to every Jew who was willing to embrace *Hellenismos*, i.e., the “Greek way of life” (τὸν Ἑλληνικὸν χαρακτήρα)²⁴.

It is important to stress that 1 Maccabees relates events pertaining to Judaea and its capital Jerusalem, and so does 2 Maccabees, although it was originally written by an Egyptian/Cyrenian Jew, Jason of Cyrene²⁵. So, all the while these two sources attest Jewish participation in the gymnasium in the Hellenistic period, and perceive it negatively and as a threat, their focus is on Judaea and not on Egypt, which is, on the other hand, the geographical focus of this paper. So, what about the Jews of Egypt? Is there any evidence of their involvement in local gymnasia?

3. JEWS IN EGYPTIAN GYMNASIA

So far, the only evidence of Jews in the setting of the gymnasium we have discussed came from literary sources and pertained to the foundation of a gymnasium in Jerusalem, which was (relying on the internal chronology of First and Second Maccabees) still under Seleucid control. However, actual physical remains of the gymnasium in Jerusalem, to which the previous texts refer to, still await discovery²⁶. In light of the absence of such “hard evidence” confirming the information contained in these literary sources, we are entitled to ask if these sources are nothing but mere fiction. Is there, for that matter, any hard evidence that securely places Jews in a gymnasial context? There is, and it comes in form of a stele that lists *ephebes* from the local gymnasium at Cyrene from the early Roman period (3/4 CE) and includes Jewish names²⁷. Comparable lists also survive from

²³ See also Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, p. 56, and Bringmann, “Gymnasion und griechische Bildung”, p. 324.

²⁴ 2 Macc. 4:10.

²⁵ On the central role of Jerusalem as *polis* in 2 Maccabees, see Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, pp. 6-8.

²⁶ N.M. Kennell, “New Light on 2 Maccabees 4:7-15”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 56 (2005), pp. 23-24.

²⁷ The right column of the stele features an Elazar (*sic*), son of Elazar, Agathokles, son of Elazar (CJZC 7a, right hand column, ll. 48-49); and a certain Iesous, son of Antiphilos (CJZC 6, col. 2) and Chaireas, son of Ioudas (CJZC 7c, l. 13), on col. II. The

Asia Minor²⁸. This material constitutes neutral evidence, but it implies that Jews were welcome to enroll and study at gymnasia in Egypt and in areas under Egyptian control²⁹. Given the early-Roman period dating of the inscription, together with the suggested dating of the Books of Maccabees, we may assume that Jewish enrollment in gymnasia did not begin in the Roman, but already earlier in the Ptolemaic period. Explicit evidence for this assumption, however, is lacking (or at least not available yet)³⁰.

3.1. *A Jew from Alexandria or an Alexandrian Jew? Does Greek paideia help?*

Things begin to look different when turning to our next piece of evidence, a well-known and often-cited papyrus, CPJ 2.151. This document is a petition written by an Alexandrian Jew notably called Helenos, son of Tryphon. The papyrus is dated (4 BCE) and was, or was intended to be, submitted to the *Praefectus Aegypti*, a certain Gaius Turranius. The papyrus features several corrections and deletions – perhaps the most significant of which is the change that comes in the first line, where Helenos changes (or is required to change) his self-identification as an “Alexandrian Jew” to “a Jew from Alexandria”³¹. There is a debate whether this document is a draft or was submitted, and then “reviewed” and altered by one of Turranius’ clerks, but I support the former assumption³². The papyrus is usually cited by scholars in reference to the Jewish struggle

stele also includes names of *epheboi* who might have been Jewish (such as: Simon, son of Pothon; Alexis, son of Alexis; Theudotus, son of Theudotus; Bartybas, son of Bartybas; Onomarchos, son of Leonidas; Ptolemy, son of Ptolemy; Orion, son of Orion [C]ZC 7a, right hand column ll. 39-52]; see also Sh. Applebaum, *Jews and Greeks in Ancient Cyrene*, Leiden, Brill, 1979, pp. 67, 135, 140-141, 167, 178, 183, 185 (for Ptolemais, see p. 288; for Cyrene, see pp. 292-293); and M.H. Williams, *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 107, 112-113.

²⁸ Williams, *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans*, p. 114. I deliberately disregard this material here because of my geographical focus on Egypt but mention of this source material should be made here.

²⁹ See on this also Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, pp. 186, 192-193.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Ἐλένου το(ῦ) Τρύφωνου(ς) Ἰουδαίου τῶν ἀπὸ Ἀλεξανδρε(ιας) [[Ἀλεξανδρέω(ς)].

³² For this assumption, see also Kasher, “The Jewish Attitude”, pp. 149-150; G. Schimanowski, *Juden und Nichtjuden in Alexandrien. Koexistenz und Konflikte bis zum Pogrom unter Trajan (117 n. Chr.)*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2006, pp. 148, 161 n. 105; see also Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, p. 101.

for equal civil rights in Egypt³³. Though not entirely unrelated, I wish to point out that, in order to facilitate his appeal to be exempt from the poll-tax (*laographia*), Helenos first cites his gymnasial education, rather than bringing up his age – he was older than 60 – which was the age-limit for the liability to pay the poll-tax, a detail, he only mentions towards the end of his petition³⁴. He set aside his strongest legal argument, his age, in favor of the strongest emotional/subjective argument he could put forth, namely his self-identification as a proper “Greek Alexandrian” based on the education he enjoyed in the gymnasium. But we are left with the notion that Helenos’ gymnasial education, being a Jew, perhaps worked in his favor when convincing the Roman officials to consider him a full-fledged Alexandrian exempt from paying the poll-tax. Still, for him, his upbringing – his *paideia* (παιδεία) – was the key element to his claim, although we do not know, as noted, if it was the same for the official who judged his case. It seems that there was some discomfort with Jews in the gymnasium on the side of the local ruling class. Helenos was evidently proud to participate in Greek *culture*; the Greeks, however, may not have been all that thrilled about it, not because of cultural reasons, but because of political reasons, and reasons of civic status: a Jew, a member of a lower class, had no place in the gymnasium that was run by upper class people; let alone, since the membership in the gymnasium would automatically grant an Alexandrian citizenship³⁵. That Jews had no place in Egyptian gymnasia in the Roman period, is also demonstrated by the next example.

3.2. *Claudius’ edict – When Jews interfere in Alexandrian affairs, Part I: CPJ 2.153*

In 41 CE, following a few years of continued violence between the Jews and the Greco-Egyptian population in Alexandria, the Roman emperor Claudius issued a well-known decree, seeking to defuse the volatile situation in the city³⁶. A copy of his decree survives on a papyrus that was

³³ See, for instance, Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, pp. 200-205; Méléze-Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt*, p. 164. For the view that a professional scribe was responsible for changing Helenos’ status, see e.g. CPJ 2, pp. 29-30.

³⁴ Méléze-Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt*, pp. 164-165.

³⁵ Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, p. 104.

³⁶ On the so-called Alexandrian riots, see S. Gambetti, *The Alexandrian Riots of 38 C.E. and the Persecution of the Jews: A Historical Reconstruction*, Leiden, Brill, 2009; Méléze-Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt*, pp. 161-183; Schimanowski, *Juden und Nichtjuden in Alexandrien*.

carefully copied out by a certain Nemesion, son of Zoilus, a tax collector, on the backside of a tax register from Philadelphia dated to 37/38 CE³⁷. The document was part of his tax archive. It is dated to 14 Neos Sebastos of year 2 of Claudius (= 10 November 41) and was issued in reply to the complaints of a Greek embassy sent to the emperor from Alexandria in 41 CE. It lists the twelve members of the embassy, to whom words of courtesy are addressed, followed by obligatory honors devoted to Claudius by the Alexandrians, mostly concerning the imperial cult, and their requests. Then, the “Jewish question” is discussed in order to settle the dispute between the Alexandrians and the Jews. The emperor urges the parties to cease any hostility and live with mutual forbearance. If they fail to do so, he would be obliged to intervene. Of particular interest to us are two lines in the fifth column of the document (ll. 92-93). After grumbling about the insolence of the Jews having sent not one, but two delegations to the emperor “as if they were dwelling in two cities” (ὥσπερ ἐν δυσεὶ πόλεσιν κατοικοῦντας), a thing, the emperor emphasizes, that had “never been done before” (ὡ μὴ πρότερόν ποτε ἐπράκθη), the decree continues as follows: “nor [shall the Jews] intrude in the gymnasiarchic or kosmetic contests reaping the fruits of their households while enjoying the abundance of benefits without envy in a foreign *polis*”³⁸. The Alexandrian delegation had complained about the presence of Jews in the gymnasium during physical contests. It is unclear whether this pertains to Jewish *athletes* participating in these contests or to Jewish *spectators* who are present in the stadium – or to both³⁹. But the subtext is clear: Jewish presence in the gymnasium is undesired. While the Jews apparently very much desired to partake in Greek/Hellenistic culture, in this

³⁷ The copy of the decree was first published by H.I. Bell in his *Jews and Christians in Egypt: The Jewish Troubles in Alexandria and the Athanasian Controversy*, London, British Museum, 1924. For further bibliography, see CPJ 2, p. 36. For some more recent scholarship see Schimanowski, *Juden und Nichtjuden*, pp. 165-175.

³⁸ CPJ 2.153, ll. 92-93: ... μηδὲ ἐπισπαίρειν γυμνασιαρχικοῖς ἢ κοσμητικοῖς ἀγώσει ...

³⁹ In this context, we may refer to Philo’s tractate on the Ten Commandments, *De specialibus legibus*, in which he postulates the following: “For who can be more completely the benefactors of their children than parents, who have not only caused them to exist, but have afterwards thought them worthy of food, and after that again of education both in body and soul, and have enabled them not only to live, but also to live well; training their body by gymnastic and athletic rules [...]” (εὐεργέται μέντοι τίνες ἂν εἴεν μᾶλλον ἢ παιδῶν γονεῖς, οἱ καὶ μὴ ὄντας εἰργάσαντο καὶ αὐθις τροφῆς ἤξίωσαν καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα παιδείας τῆς κατὰ τε σῶμα καὶ ψυχὴν, [καὶ] ἵνα μὴ μόνον ζῶσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ εὖ ζῶσιν; τὸ μὲν οὖν σῶμα διὰ τῆς γυμναστικῆς καὶ ἀλειπτικῆς ὠφέλησαν ...), Philo of Alexandria, *De specialibus legibus* 2.40.229-230. It is clear from this statement how important gymnasial education was for an Alexandrian Jew of Philo’s standing.

case athletic games, the custodians of that culture disallowed them to do so, thus denying them access to their culture. They seem to have felt that Jews were intruding the gymnasial sphere, much like the notion expressed in the papyrus cited in the opening quotation of this paper (CPJ 2.150). Again, where Jews wished to participate in Hellenistic/Roman cultural activities, Greek and Roman officials perceived this as an intrusion that can have political implications – Jews were no longer members of the ruling class as in the Ptolemaic period, and their low socio-political status precluded their participation in gymnasial events⁴⁰. Egyptian gymnasia were increasingly run by members of the affluent local Graeco-Egyptian elites, among whom lower classes like Jews had no place⁴¹.

3.3. *A vote, a riot – When Jews interfere in Alexandrian affairs, Part II: Josephus, BJ 2.489-498*

Another incident where Jews interfered in Alexandrian affairs is said to have taken place around the time of the outbreak of the Judean war against Rome in the year 66 CE. The incident was recorded by Josephus – if we can associate this story with the world of the gymnasium at all. In Book Two of the *Judean War* (BJ 2.489-498), Josephus recounts a fierce outburst of violence between Alexandria's Greek and Jewish population. The unrest was triggered when Jews came flocking to the city's amphitheater during a debate of the Greek citizen-body about a possible dispatch of an embassy to the Roman emperor Nero⁴². Josephus does not supply any additional details about the actual purpose of the embassy; nor does he specify why the Jews interrupted the meeting and whether gymnasial games were also held in that amphitheater, either directly before or after the vote⁴³. The mere presence of Jews in the amphitheater,

⁴⁰ There were, of course, exceptions, such as Tiberius Alexander, and other members of Philo's family; see G.E. Sterling, "Pre-eminent in Family and Wealth: Gaius Julius Alexander and the Alexandrian Jewish Community". In *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period*, edited by A. Salvesen, M. Frenkel, and S. Pearce, Leiden, Brill, 2020, pp. 259-279.

⁴¹ Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, p. 104.

⁴² BJ 2.490-491.

⁴³ That public events were held in gymnasia was already noted Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, pp. 85, 93. We may vice versa presume that large events associated with the gymnasium, such as voting and/or athletic contests, were held in public venues (such as theaters) that could accommodate larger crowds when needed.

however, was immediately perceived as a provocation by the Alexandrian Greeks. The incident, for that matter, is reminiscent of Claudius’ warning to the Jews to not “intrude in the gymnasiarchic or kosmetic contests”⁴⁴. Be that as it may, mass violence erupted and Roman security forces scrambled to quell the disturbance. Josephus records very graphically and in vivid colors how, in the wake of the incident, Roman soldiers descended upon the Jews residing in Alexandria’s *Delta* quarter, slaughtering them by the ten-thousands⁴⁵. If we can attach credibility to Josephus’ colorful account, and link it to the gymnasium, then we have in front of us an example of how harsh a consequence it was when Jews crossed the boundary and sought to partake in matters connected to the world of the gymnasium.

3.4. *No discus anymore, but a “Jewish burden”: CPJ 3.519 and Jewish athletes in the gymnasium?*

So far, our survey of the evidence conveyed the resistance of the Graeco-Roman ruling class towards Jewish participation in the gymnasium; whether this involved one’s Greek education, or active participation in gymnasia games as contesters, or passively, as spectators. Within this context, I wish to refer to another rather obscure papyrus, CPJ 3.519⁴⁶, dated paleographically to the second century CE, whose origin is probably Fayumic⁴⁷. It is a literary papyrus containing remnants of three columns of what seems to be a mimic play or theatrical performance on athletics or a gymnasia contest⁴⁸. The second column contains a reference to an athlete bearing “a Jewish burden” (καὶ [ο]ὔτος φέρων Ἰουδαϊκὸν φορτίον ...) – whatever that may mean – who is mocked for it by the crowd⁴⁹. The editors of CPJ 3 suggested that this “burden” was a physical object carried around by an actor playing the Jew, such as a Torah-scroll, phylacteries, or even a tax-slip, signifying that the man had paid the Jewish-tax⁵⁰. However, in a 1997 article, Allen Kerkeslager has argued that (a) this text

⁴⁴ See *supra*, n. 38.

⁴⁵ BJ 2.494-497.

⁴⁶ CPJ 3.519 (= Staatliche Museen Berlin, P. 13406; TM 63757).

⁴⁷ W. Schubart, *Griechische literarische Papyri*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1950, Nr. 37 (“Über Agone”), pp. 69-72.

⁴⁸ CPJ 3, pp. 116-119.

⁴⁹ Line 20 continues with that question to the audience: τί γέλᾳτε (“why do you laugh?”). The laughter is obviously directed to the man carrying the “Jewish burden”.

⁵⁰ CPJ 3, p. 116.

should be placed clearly in the context of the gymnasium; (b) the Jewish load described here must have been an obvious sign of Jewish identity, in this case, most probably a circumcised penis⁵¹; (c) that this literary piece is actually not anti-Jewish, as CPJ's editors had thought; in fact, it disagrees with the crowd's mocking of the Jew⁵². It asks: "Why do you laugh? Why are some of you disgusted at what was said or at the man you see?"⁵³. While I concur with Kerkeslager on points (a) and (b), and technically also with point (c), it still should be pointed out that the text is simply too fragmentary to draw unequivocal conclusions about whether or not the piece was all that *pro*-Jewish. On the face of it, and according to what is left of it, it is indeed more positive than it is negative, as maintained by Kerkeslager. Although the author of this play may have viewed with favor the participation of Jewish athletes in gymnasial contests, he clearly describes a scenario which points to a different direction, i.e., the mockery of a Jewish athlete, a scenario that is much more compatible with the evidence we have encountered so far in the other papyri, namely the notion of rejection.

4. CONCLUSION

What can we learn about the participation of Jews as a minority group in gymnasia? In briefly reviewing the evidence I have adduced so far, we receive a mixed picture: The majority of our sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish, perceive Jewish participation in the gymnasium negatively. The general notion exhibited in the Jewish sources is that the existence of gymnasia, and Jewish involvement in it, posed a threat to the Jewish religion, the ancestral customs, and to Jewish identity. Respectively so, also the non-Jewish sources leave us with the impression that Jewish presence in the gymnasium is somewhat of a threat; it jeopardizes the purity of this institution and its members by introducing "foreign" elements, which becomes ever so obvious from the "*boulē*-papyrus" I have cited at

⁵¹ The assumption that the "Jewish burden" is a reference to a circumcised penis has been convincingly argued in a recent article by M. Peppard, "Bearing a 'Jewish Weight': A New Interpretation of a Greek Comedic Papyrus About Athletics (CPJ 3.519)", *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 5 (2024), pp. 21-41.

⁵² A. Kerkeslager, "Maintaining Jewish Identity in the Greek Gymnasium: 'A Jewish Load' in CPJ 3.519 (= P. Schub. 37 = P. Berol. 13406)", *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 28 (1997), pp. 12-33.

⁵³ τί γελᾶτε οἱ δὲ (μυσάττεσθ[αι]) εὖ τὸ εἰρημένον ἢ τὸν ὀρώμε[νον].

the beginning of this paper. Although the latter document did not refer to Jews explicitly, we discern the same kind of anxiety hovering over Claudius’ decree. As opposed to the previous document, Claudius’ letter, on the other hand, pointedly refers to Jews intruding the gymnasium, while its very issuance came at the backdrop of violent clashes between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors in Alexandria. Claudius’ reproach of the Jewish infiltration of the Alexandrian gymnasium was neither rooted in anti-Judaism, nor was it designed to prohibit social mobility. Rather, and well in line with other Roman status regulations, it conveys the intent to maintain a stable hierarchy by preventing unrestrained and illicit claims to acquire a higher status, allowing changes of status to occur by means of proper procedure (e.g. through patronage) only⁵⁴. Needless to add that it was also designed to mediate between two opposing camps and thus, to maintain the peace in the city. However, these efforts of mediation bore no fruits – at least in the long run. Some decades later, in 66 CE, the same anxiety caused violence in the city once more – as per Josephus – if we can connect that incident to activities associated with the gymnasium.

But then again, we have also discovered other kind of evidence, namely evidence that is either neutral, or assesses the involvement of Jews in the gymnasium positively. The neutral evidence comes in form of inscriptions and simply attests the membership of Jews in the gymnasium. It corroborates the information gained from literary sources like First and Second Maccabees, condemning Jews who enthusiastically joined gymnasia⁵⁵. In addition, we have seen one papyrus (CPJ 2.151) in which the petitioner clung to his gymnasial education, his *paideia*, as his main argument for receiving a tax-benefit, obviously viewing his educational background as the epitome of Greekness, and certainly as something outright positive. His plea, however, did not seem to have worked, but these examples show that Jews obtaining Greek *paideia* and those who participated in the world of the gymnasium were (a) a reality, but (b) condemned by both sides – the “in” and the “out” group, i.e. by Jews and non-Jews. As such, these sources suggest that the gymnasium was a contested liminal space, or at least it developed into one. Something changed with time. While Jews were welcome in Seleucid and Ptolemaic gymnasia (and may even had their own “Jewish” gymnasia), the papyrological evidence from the Roman period suggests that Jews (and presumably also

⁵⁴ J. Rowlandson, “Dissing the Egyptians: Legal, Ethnic, and Cultural Identities in Roman Egypt”, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 120 (2013), p. 230.

⁵⁵ 1 Macc. 1:14-15; 2 Macc. 4:13-15.

other minority groups) were barred from participation in gymnasia later. In the Ptolemaic period, Egyptian gymnasia included everyone belonging to the socio-fiscal group of *Hellenes* (including anyone who could afford it) which, of course, included Jews⁵⁶; in the Roman period, gymnasia were run by state-monitored and state-sanctioned local elites that were adamant to maintain their social status in a socio-political environment that generally looked down on its native (Egyptian) population⁵⁷, including Jews, who no longer were considered *Hellenes*⁵⁸. A lot was at stake – not only tax-rates. Being an Alexandrian, a Roman, a Greek, or a “simple Egyptian” – or a Jew – mattered, and it is this notion that explains the anxiety and the hostility towards Jews when they tried to immerse themselves in the world of the gymnasium: it was perceived as an infiltration and an unjust deed. Egyptian gymnasia, thus, experienced a shift from a *culturally inclusive* to a *socio-politically exclusive* institution; there was no longer any space for Jews. It is somewhat ironic that the gymnasium, one of the most prominent institutions for the promotion of Greek culture in the ancient world, and its custodians, were *that* exclusive and fearful of opening their doors to outsiders. In closing, I hope to have made a small contribution to the question of the *inclusion* (or rather *exclusion*) of non-Greek minorities, and local ethnic groups, such as the Jews, in the gymnasia of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt.

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⁵⁶ Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, p. 173.

⁵⁷ See Rowlandson, “Dissing the Egyptians”, pp. 213-247.

⁵⁸ On this issue, see also Paganini, *Gymnasia and Greek Identity*, pp. 41-44, 153, 156, 230-233, 243.

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