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Invisibility, Erasure, and a Jewish Tombstone in Roman Britain

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Abstract

Rigorous scholarship relies on evidence. But in the case of Jews in antiquity, absence of evidence has often been taken to be evidence of absence. An abundance of caution has frequently meant the erasure of Jews from antiquity. Using the test case of a tombstone from Roman Britain, I suggest that a hermeneutic of imagination can be helpful in making sure Jews in antiquity are not invisible.

Keywords

funerary monuments, Jews, Roman Britain, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

As far as I can tell, the last time an article was published about the possibility of Jewish residents of Roman Britain,¹ the United Kingdom was still on rations. It was Shimon Applebaum's 1951 essay, "Were There Jews in Roman Britain?"² Citing some literary sources, some names, a few numismatic finds, and some other material evidence—largely from the continent, where evidence for Jews is more plentiful, rather than Britain—Applebaum makes a case for the likelihood of Jews living in Roman Britain, but laments that the paltry amount of evidence means he cannot be more conclusive. Part of the explanation for this dearth of research on Jews in Roman Britain since then is that very lack of definitive evidence Applebaum observes: there is very little in the way of clear evidence for Jewish populations in Britain during the

¹ I will discuss Jews and Jewishness in this article while acknowledging that it is impossible to define these terms to universal satisfaction. Much has been written about how or whether we can define what it is to be a Jew or a Judean in antiquity, and about whether we should imagine these categories as social, ethnic, religious, etc., notably in the *Marginalia* forum of 2014. I concur with Adele Reinhartz's position in that context that to employ Judean rather than Jew risks erasing Jews from antiquity altogether (Reinhartz, "The Vanishing Jews of Antiquity.") Many scholars have opined that whatever modern scholars debate about terminology, there is something that we can identify as Jewishness in the ancient world, with evidence left behind by Jews, which we can analyse (Ehrensperger and Sheinfeld, *Gender and Second Temple Judaism*, 4-5), or that "there are Jews, and those Jews have practices and ideas that are distinctively "Jewish," but that there is no such fixed "thing" as Judaism per se" (Kraemer, *The Mediterranean Diaspora*, 40).

² Applebaum, "Were There Jews in Roman Britain?" 189-205.

Roman period. Identifying specifically Jewish material remains is notoriously fraught, in any almost geographical location. This is because there are always questions of whether it is possible to distinguish Jews from any other Roman person, even, as Ross Kraemer has shown, when iconographic elements like candelabra or menorah are present.³ Assumptions that Jews were always clearly self-identifying as Jews in the material record, or that they were unlikely to have made use of the same imagery as their non-Jewish neighbours, likewise do not hold up, making positive identification of specifically Jewish material evidence tricky, reflecting the slipperiness of diaspora identity.⁴ In light of these issues, I would like to suggest employing a hermeneutic of imagination when examining this limited collection of evidence. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes,

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.⁵

Sedgwick reminds us that, while historical events may or may not have happened, the realm of possible events is far broader and imaginative than we give the historical record credit for. So, instead of assuming the absence of Jews in the Roman British historical record without definitively Jewish artefacts, I hold that as scholars we would do better to hopefully imagine Jewish presence wherever we find Roman settlements, even if it is not possible to clearly identify Jewish material evidence. Given what we know of diasporic identity, being overly cautious in the name of maintaining

³ Kraemer, "Jewish Tuna and Christian Fish," 141-62. See also Elsner, "Archaeologies and Agendas," 114-28.

⁴ Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora," 233-46.

⁵ Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 146.

academic suspicion presents its own dangers. Approaching the material record for evidence of some unifying Jewish identity, rather than of a more complicated relationship with an imagined homeland as Hall urges us, prevents scholars from recognising fuller picture of Jewish diasporic life. The current minimalist approach to locating Jews in antiquity risks erasing them altogether.

Reconstructing the lives of ancient people requires some imagination, regardless of how much evidence there is to work with. Some scholars are already doing this imaginative work, however cautiously. Noy writes, "it is perfectly plausible for relatively small urban settlements to have a substantial Jewish community without any inscriptions," giving the example of Minorca, for which the only evidence of a Jewish community is a Christian polemical document.⁶ The paths our imagination takes in framing this evidence can be bound up with hegemonic structures inherited from the long legacy and ongoing reality of Christian-supremacy. Annabel Wharton warns us that "we are all continually responsible for eliminating the Other through lapses in the idiosyncratic hegemonies of our own memories."⁷ She continues:

Hegemony ... incorporates material culture in the construction of the story of its own dominance. Recognizing the archaeological residue of a subordinate group in an ancient society requires legible, identifying signs. Without such signs, a structure is absorbed by the prevailing culture.⁸

In other words, the location of our scholarly stance as inevitably within the confines of Christian hegemony creates the risk—and reality—that unmarked or "neutral" evidence is subsumed into the dominant culture; this is true in the context of pre-Christianized Roman Empire as well as later, since Jews have always been non-dominant in those contexts, and Christian supremacist thinking has governed the

⁶ Noy, "Migration," 171.

⁷ Wharton, "Erasure," 211.

⁸ Wharton, "Erasure," 211.

study of ancient Judaism—and of antiquity generally—for centuries. Jewish erasure, as discussed below, has ramifications within and beyond the study of antiquity.

In this context, I offer a case study. An overlooked second-century tombstone, discovered in 1726 and currently housed in the University of Glasgow's Hunterian Museum, could suggest a Jewish presence in Roman Britain, and it is this piece of evidence that I will use as a test case. The tombstone's owner, Salmanes, the fifteen-year-old son of Salmanes, senior, had the misfortune of dying around the Antonine Wall, not far from present-day Glasgow. Thankfully for my purposes, Salmanes Senior paid to erect a monument for his son. Why were father and son in Britain? How had they ended up at the Antonine wall? Do the other people buried around Salmanes junior give any clues to their way of life or place of origin? This paper encourages imagining full Jewish participation in the ancient world, and with that the possibility of Jewish lives in the far reaches of the Roman Empire.

The Gravestone

The gravestone (Figure 1) ****PLACE Figure 1 HERE**** was unearthed in 1726 in Kirkintilloch, Dunbartonshire, Scotland, during the excavation of a tumulus in the same location.⁹ As is suggested from the crack running through it, it was found in two pieces, lying separately from one another. The little scholarship there is on this artefact describes the name as Syrian,¹⁰ Semitic,¹¹ or merely 'eastern.'¹² Tomlin goes so far as to say that Salmanes "is a good Semitic name, which in English becomes 'Solomon,'" but he does not entertain the idea of Salmanes being anything other than

⁹ *RIB* 2182

¹⁰ Tomlin, *Britannia Romana*, 224, 251-2.

¹¹ Birley, *People of Roman Britain*, 128; Keppie, *Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones*, 114; Collingwood and Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, 673; Macdonald, *The Roman Wall in Scotland*, 438, no.59.

¹² Keppie and Arnold, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*, no. 116; Salway, *Frontier People*, 159.

'Syrian'.¹³ The Blackwell *Companion to Roman Britain* says that Anthony Birley calls Salmanes 'Jewish';¹⁴ however every edition of Birley's *People of Roman Britain* that I have been able to access uses the term 'Semitic' rather than 'Jewish.'¹⁵

I suggest that the presence of the name Salmanes should lead us to imagine the possibility of a Jewish grave. The stone includes the words *Dis Manibus*, and is decorated with a wreath, what are possibly palm fronds, and rosettes. Reading this imagery is as fraught as attempting to categorise any ancient iconography as belonging uniquely to one community rather than another. As Eric C. Smith observes, "we have come to accept it as a given that images from antiquity must map inevitably onto discernible and discrete religious systems,"¹⁶ even though such rigid identifications correspond neither to what survives of ancient evidence, nor to what we know of the realities of ancient (nor, frankly, of contemporary) image production and use.

Some specific elements of the Salmanes tombstone bear exploring in further detail. The presence of the phrase *dis manibus* on the stone would be enough for many to discount the possibility that Salmanes is Jewish.¹⁷ *Dis manibus* is an invocation to the gods of the underworld, a phrase whose use many scholars assume excludes strictly monotheistic Jews. However, Kraemer points out several examples

¹³ Tomlin, *Britannia Romana*, 252.

¹⁴ Todd, *Companion to Roman Britain*, 285.

¹⁵ Birley, *People of Roman Britain*, 198; I have not been able to access the 1988 reprint. It is possible that Todd (*Companion*, 285) assumes the terms are interchangeable, or that Tomlin, Birley and others who describe Salmanes as "Semitic" are using the term to mean Jewish. Another, Palmyran, inscription from the same era (RIB 1065), dedicated to a woman named Regina, the wife of a Palmyran, is not described in Philips as "Semitic," (*CSIR*, 40.109) but it is included in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* 2.3 (1908), 3901. That RIB 1065 is included in this category suggests to me that Semitic in these instances is intended as a general term which might include Jews but is not used to indicate Jewishness specifically. For the racist origins of the word, see Jonathan Judaken, "Rethinking Anti-Semitism."

¹⁶ Smith, *Jewish Glass and Christian Stone*, 111.

¹⁷ Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*; Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, 332. See Kraemer, "Jewish Tuna," 155-8.

of inscriptions in which *dis manibus* is used for a burial in which the deceased is also referred to as *Iudaeus* or *Iudaea*.¹⁸ Thus, the presence of the burial formula should not exclude the possibility of a Jewish grave.

Palm fronds have been associated with the *luyav* and *sukkot* on other Jewish graves,¹⁹ but in this case such a possibility is not mentioned in the scholarship.²⁰ As Kraemer has shown, palm fronds are far from uniquely Jewish. Thus, if they are palm fronds, they are not a strong indicator either way about Salmanes' identity. However, it is also possible to read this image as a menorah. The menorah was not in use by Jews in the material record prior to the first century BCE, and only "really explodes as a symbol in the centuries following the Jewish War, when hundreds of examples appear in diverse contexts in the eastern Mediterranean and across the Roman Empire, wherever the diaspora stretched."²¹ In the Salmanes tombstone, what might be palm branches and might be menorahs have widely-spaced arms; this is in contrast to the typical appearance of palm branches, with shorter fronds more closely spaced; but it is not quite identical to a typical menorah, especially as there are nine arms rather than seven. There is a general assumption that seven-branched menorahs are the norm before the late medieval period, but in fact there is a diversity of styles of menorah in the archaeological record, from five- to nine-armed, across a range of geographical locations (see figures 2 and 3).²² **PLACE Figures 2 & 3 HERE** Goodenough

¹⁸ It has been long argued, but not consistently absorbed by the field, that it is problematic to assume the existence of a Judaism immune from the influences of Hellenism; a tendency still exists to view diaspora and/or integrated Jews as somehow less Jewish. See, for example, Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus*.

¹⁹ Kant, "Jewish Inscriptions in Greek and Latin," 671-713.

²⁰ Another funerary monument (*RIB2183*, funerary monument for Verecunda) found in proximity to the Salmanes stone features rosettes and a wreath but nothing that could be described as palm branches and/or candelabrae.

²¹ Smith, *Jewish Glass*, 113.

²² See Hachlili, *The Menorah*, esp. pp 65, 89, 115, 124, 127. Hachlili demonstrates that nine-armed menoroth are prevalent in the Diaspora as well as the Land of Israel (though her evidence is later than the Salmanes tombstone), possibly because of a tradition not to depict seven-armed menoroth after the destruction of the temple, a tradition advanced by the Talmud (BT. Menachot 28b; 'Abodah Zarah 43a;

states that "the number of branches can by no means be taken as a criterion, for unmistakable menorahs have a varying number of branches."²³ Another point in support of reading this object as a menorah is that the representations on the tombstone appear to have a base, represented by a short line underneath the central stem; this is atypical for palm branches (but not unattested), and less unusual for menorahs. Figure 770 in Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols* III shows an image with a central stem, a triangular base, and twenty long, straight branches; if this is a menorah it is one with a lot of arms! Likewise, figure 4, after Goodenough 849, depicts what appears to be a menorah with curved branches to one side, with a straight, seven branched object with a small linear base to the other; if the first carved object is a menorah, then it seems unlikely the second one is, which means it must be a palm branch with a base, similar to what we see in the Salmanes monument. **PLACE Figure 4 HERE** These sketches illustrate the variety of ways that *menoroth* are represented in funerary monuments, and in turn should encourage scholarly flexibility when reading monuments like that of Salmanes – we cannot be sure what we are looking at, let alone to whose religion it belongs.

It is possible that, outside a locale where specifically Jewish funerary imagery would be in regular use, whoever (inexpertly) carved this memorial relied heavily on their familiarity with the palm frond, and adapted it to resemble, however loosely, a menorah.²⁴ The question remains, though, whether the use of the menorah in iconography signifies a bounded religious identity at all.²⁵ While some readers may

Rosh Hashanah 24a, b), although seven-armed menoroth are also found commonly on funerary markers prior to the medieval period (117).

²³ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, I.58. Here he cites Figure 288, which has two menorahs, one of which has nine branches, and Figure 315, which has eleven.

²⁴ Personal correspondence, Eric C. Smith, 22 January 2020. Goodenough (*Jewish Symbols*, I.158) states that the menorah is often drawn like a palm and that it is often quite difficult to discern whether an artist intended a palm or a menorah.

²⁵ Smith, *Jewish Glass*, 114. As Smith (114) and Kraemer ("Jewish Tuna and Christian Fish," 151) point out, the menorah can also be read as signifying Christian identity within a Jewish ethnic context.

not be entirely convinced by my readings of the designs on the mortuary stele, this is, in fact, part of my point: the way we approach these inscriptions, and the categories we employ to analyse them, constrain our abilities to identify Jewishness. We must expect slippage in the iconography we encounter. Our comparanda, compiled carefully in the numerous volumes consulted for this article, are selective in that they represent a dataset of Jews who chose to display their Jewishness in ways that scholars twenty centuries later would identify as Jewish.²⁶ To presume that Jews are always readily identifiable relies on a (dangerous) assumption that Jews are always distinctly Other, separate and set apart from their surrounding communities.²⁷

Context of the Find

The grave itself is found in a military context, at the Antonine Wall. Salway, in his book *The Frontier People of Roman Britain*, outlines some of what likely took place at that camp, including the presence of traders and merchants from all over the ancient Mediterranean, making pottery, blacksmithing, and selling wares to homesick soldiers.²⁸ In the camp itself, merchants set up open-front shops to sell their products. It is in this context that most scholars have imagined Salmanes to live, putting forward the possibility of him travelling alongside the army as a merchant from Syria. Salway, however, proposes an alternative context, which is that Salmanes and his son may have been freedmen or enslaved workers under the service of a local fort commandant; he reminds us that there is no evidence that Salmanes was a trader at all, and observes that other tombstones found in the same vicinity are those of freedmen.²⁹ On the other hand, other graves include possibly higher ranking civilians

²⁶ Kraemer, *Mediterranean Diaspora*, 16–17. See also Alvarez-Folgado, "Jewish Diaspora," 71.

²⁷ Alvarez-Folgado, "Jewish Diaspora," 73.

²⁸ Salway, *Frontier People*, 24–26.

²⁹ Salway, *Frontier People*, 159.

since two tombstones are 'funerary banquet' type, with the deceased depicted in civil dress. We are just as able to imagine these alternative lives for Salmanes given the evidence.

Whether as an independent trader or as a freedman or enslaved worker, migration is a key factor in Salmanes' existence at the camp. While evidence for Jewish migration in antiquity is delimited by exactly the methodological issues under discussion in the present article, namely that absence of evidence is frequently taken to be evidence of absence,³⁰ there was a substantial amount of migration by Jews around the Mediterranean and beyond in the first and early second centuries CE, and particularly after the Jewish revolt during Trajan's reign.³¹ Jewish migration all over the diaspora occurred during the Second Temple period, and immediately after it, in areas which were under Roman authority.³²

The Name

Given how much we already imagine for Salmanes and his life, I want to suggest that we examine some points which suggest that Salmanes was Jewish. The strongest point in favour of considering a Jewish Salmanes is the name on the tombstone itself. Or rather, the two identical names of father and son. As Keppie notes, it is possible that both of the names inscribed should be read as *Salamanes* rather than *Salmanes*; the initial spelling in the second line seems to be spelled *Salamanes*, with the correction to add an 'E'. This correction was done in antiquity. The single name suggests that neither father nor son were Roman citizens, as Salway noted above, since Roman citizens usually had three names: *praenomen*, *nomen*, and *cognomen*.³³

³⁰ See discussion in Kraemer, *Mediterranean Diaspora*, 8–20, esp.16–17.

³¹ Noy, "Migration," 175.

³² Alvarez-Folgado, "Jewish Diaspora," 60. See also Hezser, "Travel and Mobility."

³³ Keppie, *Roman Inscribed and Sculpted Stones*, 114.

The name Salmanes (or Salamanes) has received attention in scholarship only in that is indicative of ‘foreignness’. Most commentators go into little more detail than suggesting the name is ‘eastern,’ but Collingwood and Wright give some information about potential parallel inscribed names similar to Salmanes.³⁴ They suggest parallels with Syrian gods or theophanic names, and imply a non-Jewish identity as a result.³⁵ Tal Ilan’s exhaustive volumes on Jewish names in antiquity includes a few references to Salmanes and its variations, though she does not include this particular inscription in her collection. She notes, in her first volume, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity: Palestine 330BCE-200CE*, that Syria counts as Palestine on account of the porousness of boundaries.³⁶ In that volume, however, she also notes that Solomon as a name is not attested, in line with the names of other biblical heroes such as Aaron and Elijah. In other volumes, covering different geographies and periods of time, names akin to Salmanes are attested. Ilan notes that the name Salmanes is found in the LXX as a transliteration of the names like Shalman and Solomon.³⁷ Volume 2, covering Palestine 200–650CE, does include both Greek and Hebrew examples of the name Shalman.³⁸ These examples, Ilan notes, are not always unequivocally Jewish, further confirming that distinguishing Jews from non-Jews in antiquity is frequently a difficult business, confounded by the phenomenon of what Margaret Williams calls “crypto-semitic names,” in which a semitic name is concealed within a more common name from within the repertoire of the dominant culture.³⁹

³⁴ Collingwood & Wright, *RIB*, 673; inscription 2182.

³⁵ The name Salmanes occurs in Phoenician as deity Shalman on inscription from Sidon of 2nd/3rd c BCE (see Cooke, *Text-Book*, no. 7). It also appears in Greek “on a text from near Aleppo of the end of the first century AD” (*CIG* 4450, 4451), and as an inscription in Greek (there as Salamanes) on an inscription in Shaqqa Syria (Collingwood & Wright, *RIB*, 673).

³⁶ Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names* 1, 49.

³⁷ Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names*, IV, 125.

³⁸ Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names* II, 168. $\gamma\lambda\psi$ or $\sigma\alpha\lambda\alpha\mu\acute{\alpha}\nu$ (LXX Hos. 10:4)

³⁹ Williams, *Jews in a Greco-Roman Environment*, 363.

It is true that variations on the name Salmanes are also used in contexts that are likely not Jewish. For example, there is a dedicatory relief found at a sanctuary to the god Bel at Dura Europus, dating to the early Roman period. This relief, which likely depicts the god as well as a person making an offering, is made by a “son of Shalman.”⁴⁰ However, despite the overwhelming scholarly notion that all Jews must have been strict monotheists, it would be irresponsible for us to make *a priori* assumptions about this son of Shalman—in other words to discount the possibility of individuals making offerings and participating in multiple religious communities and identities simultaneously.⁴¹

Ilan lists further examples in volume 3, covering the Western Diaspora from 330-650 CE, and in volume 4, the Eastern Diaspora. Two examples of the name are found in synagogue inscriptions from Dura Europus, both of which date to around 244 CE, though one of these is a label for King Solomon.⁴² The other commemorates the donation of an historical person of that name to the synagogue building.⁴³ Another attestation to a similar name, Salamo (Σαλαμω), is present as a graffito on the lintel of a door adjacent to the synagogue, which Noy dates to around 240 CE. This graffito is in Aramaic as well as Greek, and alongside the name Salamo refers to an Isaac, a Jacob, and possibly an Aaron.⁴⁴ An example found at Palmyra, and dating to post-150 CE, is considered by Ilan to be possibly Jewish, because the inscribed Salmanes is described as the son of one Simon, a name considered Jewish, but this inscription is

⁴⁰ Chi and Heath, *Edge of Empires*, 31-32.

⁴¹ Noy also mentions Salmanes, but very briefly: “In an epitaph from the Antonine Wall, someone named Salmanes commemorates Salmanes aged 15, presumably his son (this is not stated). The name is a Semitic one (not Jewish, as has sometimes been claimed.)” He does not dwell on the reasons why scholars should not presume a Jewish identity, nor does he include citations directing readers to where claims about Jewishness have been made. Noy, “Epigraphic Evidence for Immigrants,” 22.

⁴² Ilan, *Jewish Names IV*, 124-5

⁴³ Syr88 in Noy and Bloedhorn, eds., *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis III*; the editors note, “Salmanes is probably a form of Solomon” (152).

⁴⁴ Syr 92 in Noy and Bloedhorn, *IJO III*.

also flanked by known Syrian non-Jewish deities.⁴⁵ Likewise, we know of examples of Jews with distinctly Palmyran names.⁴⁶ These examples from Syria illustrate not only the possibility of a Jew by this name, but also, once again, the complications around Jewish iconography and identification in antiquity.

The Methodology of Imagination

Pessimism in the academic world is nothing new, and neither is pointing out its dangers and limitations. Sedgwick's essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,"⁴⁷ provides an important correction to the normative mode of critical discourse in the academy; while paranoia has its many benefits, Sedgwick proposes moving beyond questions of what we know and congregating instead around questions of what knowledge does. Knowledge is not neutral, but rather has an effect on the world around it. This has, of course, been noted among biblical scholars, such as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, who observes the limitations and dangers of uncritically upholding positivist scientific approaches to historicist biblical studies.⁴⁸ The hermeneutics of suspicion,⁴⁹ a useful way of approaching evidence, has nonetheless limited our ability to imagine Jews in antiquity; since Jews are a minority group in the ancient world, scholarship treats "pagans" or much later, Christians, as the normative demographic. This makes sense, given the numbers, but without imagination such a critical stance is limiting: without specific evidence of Jews there are no Jews. Interrogating the material and textual record for hard evidence of Jewish existence indicates a paranoia: Jews do not exist unless we can pin down exactly what

⁴⁵ Ilan, *Jewish Names* IV, 125.

⁴⁶ Lifshitz and Schwabe, *Beth She'arim*, 10-11.

⁴⁷ Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading."

⁴⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, "Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10-11.

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, esp 32-24.

proves someone is Jewish. Thinking about how knowledge works reminds us that such paranoia risks the erasure of Jews from the historical record.⁵⁰

And it is not as if historians are opposed to imagining a wealth of details about their subjects' lives. So far quite a lot of imagining has taken place in the history of scholarship on Salamanes and his son. People have imagined all sorts of things about his life, his job, and his reason for being in what is now Scotland. But it is surprising to me that only one scholar—and another author of historical fiction⁵¹—have imagined the possibility that he might be Jewish. Why should our default assumption be not to expect Jews in Roman Britain? Why should we expect that all Jews label themselves as Jewish in some way that is obvious to us?

Of course, however imaginative we might want to be, sound scholarship is based in evidence. There is indeed a cluster of evidence for the possibility that this is a Jewish inscription. First, it seems likely that Salmanes or Salamanes came from Syria. Since most examples of the name come from a Syrian provenance, and since we know about the presence of Syrian archers at the Antonine Wall,⁵² it seems reasonable to investigate the presence of Jews in Syria as one way of thinking about Salmanes's identity. We know that there was a significant Jewish population in Syria in the first, second, and third centuries CE,⁵³ and we have examples of the name used in synagogue inscriptions from towns in Syria, which on the whole seems to have had an incredibly diverse population. Though the credibility of Acts as an historical document should be viewed with suspicion, it does suggest that there was more than

⁵⁰ It also reinforces the narrative of an undifferentiated, normative Judaism that developed smoothly and linearly from Moses to the rabbis, when in reality the varieties of Jewish experience in antiquity are infinite.

⁵¹ Young, *Farewell Britannia*.

⁵² *RIB* 1171 records a funerary inscription for a standard-bearer from Palmyra.

⁵³ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.43; Philo Philo, *Embassy* 36.281-82.

one synagogue in Damascus (Acts 9:2), a claim that would have needed, at the very least, to *seem* probable to its late first-century audience.⁵⁴

Dura boasts several religious and linguistic communities living side by side from before the Roman period and continuing into the Parthian period. It also represents "our best source for day-to-day life in a small town situated in the periphery of the Graeco-Roman world."⁵⁵ This day-to-day life includes dozens of various sanctuaries, including a mithraeum, a synagogue, and a house church in addition to many other non-Jewish/non-Christian religious spaces. Karen Stern's work on the synagogue at Dura demonstrates how Jewish modes of memory-making are locally bound. She writes, "memory practices were neither uniform among Jews throughout ancient Syria, nor were they likely so elsewhere in antiquity."⁵⁶ If we are to imagine Salmenes as a Syrian Jew now living much farther north in the Roman Empire, he should remind us that his modes of memorialising his son are likely to have reflected his diaspora environment rather than a constructed and anachronistic "normative" Judaism.

This diversity should also serve to remind us of just how many communities were interacting with each other, sharing spaces and languages, homes and public spaces. It should remind us of the ways in which identities, even identities striving to put up boundary walls, are hybrid and permeable. Kraemer observes that this line of thinking, which chooses not to imagine Jews without marked evidence for participation in a normative Judaism,⁵⁷ relies on the assumption "that accommodation to the dominant culture ultimately leads to the demise of Jewishness."⁵⁸ Stuart Hall

⁵⁴ See also 1 Macc 11:62; 2 Cor 11:32

⁵⁵ Kaizer, "Introduction," 4.

⁵⁶ Stern, "Memory, Postmemory, and Place," 54.

⁵⁷ The idea of a 'normative Judaism' at this time period is another product of scholarly imagination, which many are happy to maintain.

⁵⁸ Kraeme, *Mediterranean Diaspora*, 3.

reminds us that there are (at least) two modes of understanding identity: one which is stable and uniting and one which is slippery and marked by difference.⁵⁹ This is especially the case, as Hall's research on the Caribbean demonstrates, in the context of 'the colonial experience;' in other words, and to retroject Hall's ideas back a few thousand years, in the context of diaspora and of an empire under which minoritized peoples lived. He urges us to recognize that identity operates on two axes: "the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture."⁶⁰ We risk losing the fuller picture when we ignore the less fixed axis. The difference comes from displacement, from the experience of diaspora, where one is both identified with a 'homeland' but where one, by nature of being displaced, is also not belonging to that homeland in a straightforward way.⁶¹ For Hall, diaspora involves "the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*."⁶²

In antiquity, too, we find both types of identity being constructed, both unifying and rupturing. For example, as Shayna Sheinfeld has shown, to be 'torah observant' in the first century has no fixed meaning; that is, while the idea of 'torah observance' always refers to the idea of Jewish law, there is no agreement in ancient sources about how the laws themselves should be understood or observed.⁶³ Just as I discussed above, in the inscriptions associated with Jewish burials, Ross Kraemer observes how slippery inscribed signifiers are. If we come to the evidence with preconceived notions of how Jews expressed their identities in antiquity, if we expect

⁵⁹ Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora," 233-46. See also Hall, "Créolite," 27-41; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

⁶⁰ Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 237.

⁶¹ Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 241.

⁶² Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 244.

⁶³ Sheinfeld, "From Nomos to Logos," 61-74.

those markers to be unifying rather than disruptive, then we risk missing important examples of diaspora Jewishness.

Conclusion

This paper's title invokes the terms invisibility and erasure. I use these terms because it is easy to lose sight of invisible things and people; Jews in antiquity often blended in with their cultural surroundings, producing material or literary evidence from time to time, but which likewise is upholstered to match the culture which produced it. How or whether we are able to identify the presence of Jews via artefacts and other archaeological materials (e.g. the inclusion of menorahs or lack thereof) remains thorny and complex; that is not to say these elements should be completely disregarded in our analysis of Jewish life in antiquity. But minimalist approaches to the material record leave us with a world bereft of diaspora Jews. In this light, my approach to the funerary marker of Salmanes contributes to the ongoing discussion about the complexities of interpreting Jewish life (and death) throughout Roman antiquity. In some sense, then, the *bulk* of Jewishness in antiquity is invisible to the naked eye, and we must use our imaginations to reveal it.

The second word in my title, erasure, is the *result* if we fail to hopefully imagine these invisible Jews. Both the elder and younger Salmanes urge us to imagine the likelihood of Jewish presence throughout the empire, and to be aware that our own presuppositions about what it means to be Jewish in antiquity can affect the kind of evidence we see. Wharton urges us to be mindful of the ways that Christian hegemony has dictated—and continues to dictate—the methods and approaches we employ as a guild, and the limitations that result from those delimiting categories of analysis. The funerary rites of Roman-era Jews were very similar to those of non-

Jews of that era.⁶⁴ We see in the archaeological record of Syria the diversity of the population in language and religion, and we saw evidence of synagogue inscriptions made by or on behalf of men named Salmanes, which also sometimes included elements that surprised us, such as other gods. When we prioritise our suspicion of ancient evidence, we construct an epistemology in which most Jews are likely invisible. Constructing knowledge in that way is damaging and potentially dangerous since it reduces the Jewish population. And what is more, it rests on standards that are not adhered to for other categories; the identity, livelihood, and life story of Salmanes is richly imagined, but his Jewishness must be proven. Yet there is material evidence of a multi-ethnic Roman presence at the northern edge of empire during this period. I find it easier to imagine the quiet, unremarkable presence of Jews in Roman Britain than I do to imagine that not a single Jew set foot on this island until 1066.⁶⁵ What I hope I have pointed out is that when we apply an understanding of diaspora, and when we employ a methodology of imagination, it becomes less difficult to find space for Jews. It is difficult to suggest areas of further application beyond Salmanes's memorial; rather than offer specific suggestions for future study, I encourage readers to reconsider artefacts they have already observed, perhaps ones that are not considered Jewish, as well as any they come upon in the future through a more imaginative lens. In this way, we can begin to undo the assumption that Jews are always a recognizable Other, aliens within their surrounding communities.⁶⁶ In remembering Salmanes, I hope this paper helps us remember the presence of ordinary, average Jews in the world, whose archaeological record, in being somewhat

⁶⁴ Levison, "Roman Character of Funerals," 254.

⁶⁵ Of so-called "Anglo-Saxon" England, for example, Scheil writes that there was no Jewish present, and that Jews were "absent... in any real physical sense" (*The Footsteps of Israel*, 3), since, as he notes, "Scholarly consensus maintains that Jews settled in England only after the Norman Conquest" despite the presence of large communities of Jews in Northern Europe prior to that time (7 & n.14).

⁶⁶ Alvarez-Folgado, "Jewish Diaspora," 73.

unremarkable, demonstrates how cautious we need to be about our assumptions of how identity is displayed or performed.

This caution is especially important in light of the rising threat of fascism and antisemitism in the past few years. Wharton writes, "the desire to eliminate the ethnic Other from the cultural present involves the removal of the material evidence of their presence in the past."⁶⁷ In contemporary white supremacist imagination the Roman Empire holds a place of special prominence;⁶⁸ the stakes for erasing Jews are high. While I do not suggest that most present-day scholars have nefarious aims to support white supremacist enterprises, as some of our predecessors have,⁶⁹ we have a responsibility as scholars not to provide fodder for racist ideologies such as Nazism and other fascist campaigns. Imagining Roman Britain devoid of Jews aligns with the aims and beliefs of white nationalist movements currently gaining momentum in the UK and elsewhere,⁷⁰ despite (or perhaps because of) our commitments to academic rigour or impartiality. Regardless of whether we are antisemitic or racist ourselves, the fact of systemic antisemitism and systemic racism exists; we are obliged to work against epistemologies that emerge from those systems, not to simply follow the well-worn paths they have created.⁷¹ The erasure of Jews from antiquity, some of which can happen through vandalism or through racism, is just as dangerous when it happens through forgetfulness, omission, or, as I suggest, a lack of imagination.

⁶⁷ Wharton, "Erasure," 208.

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Futo Kennedy, "We Condone It by Our Silence." For examples of white supremacist use of Greco-Roman antiquity to support antisemitic views, see <https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/category/anti-semitism/>

⁶⁹ See Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*; Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*; Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*.

⁷⁰ The British Nationalist Party (BNP), for instance, imagines itself as the true defenders of an "authentic" indigenous British ethos, which includes their understanding of the nation's (white) Christian heritage. See Woodbridge, "Christian Credentials?" 26-27.

⁷¹ On the image of the smooth path as a site of complacency, and of the difficult, overgrown path as one of resistance, see Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*

Appendix: Figures

Figure 1:

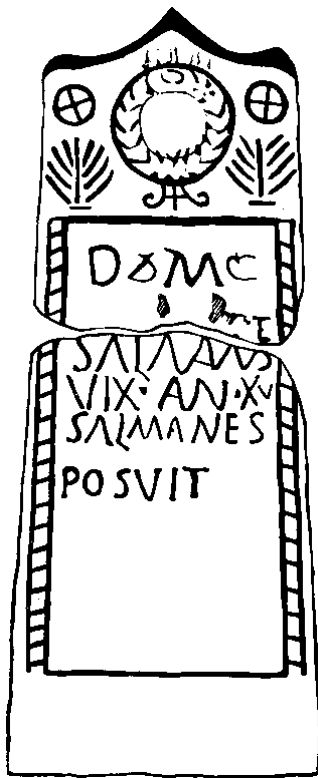


Figure 1: RIB2182. Source: romaninscriptionsofbritain.org

Figure 2:

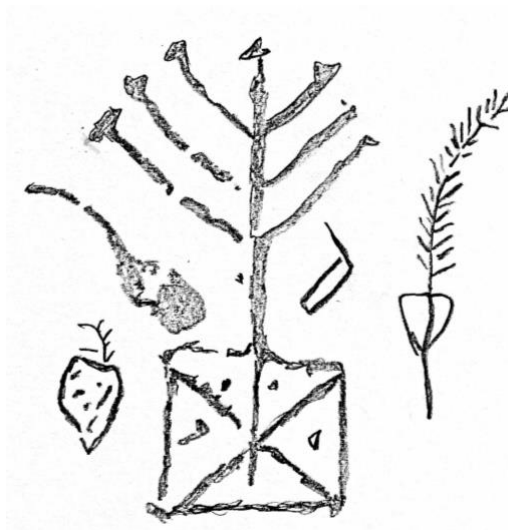


Figure 2. After Figure 719 in Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols III*, from a tombstone in the Monteverde Catacombs. This image shows a menorah alongside a palm branch; the menorah has long straight branches with a base, as opposed to the palm which has many short fronds. By Meredith J C Warren.

Figure 3:

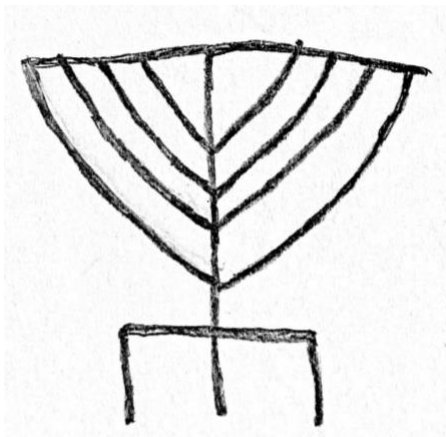


Figure 3. A nine-branched menorah, after Hachlili, *Menorah* (2018) D.13.40. By Meredith J C Warren.

Figure 4:

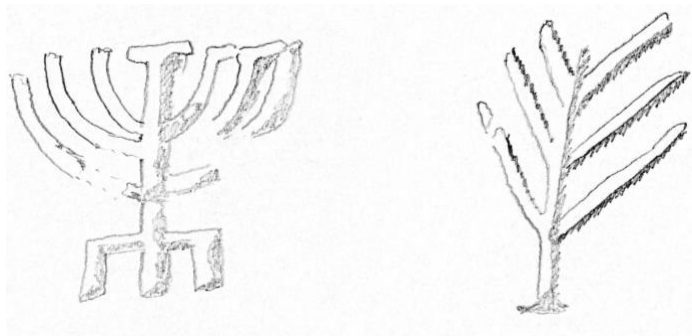


Figure 4. Partial sketch of Goodenough 849. By Meredith J C Warren.

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