


ANATOMY OF A COUP: REASSESSING THE REIGN OF JUDAH ARISTOBULUS I

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Abstract

This chapter explores the reign of Judah Aristobulus I (104/103 BCE), with a focus on the alleged coup and violent death of his brother Antigonus. First, it is shown that Josephus intentionally prioritized the Antigonus story over other aspects of Aristobulus's rule, using it to foreshadow problems that would plague the Hasmonean dynasty in the following decades. Second, a historical analysis reveals that the dynastic crisis of 104/103 BCE was much more severe than Josephus suggests, with significant tension within the ruling family and at the court. However, a close reading of the Antigonus narrative also provides further insights into the Hasmonean power structure. It is in this episode that the ostentatious self-presentation of Hasmonean rulers is described in greater detail for the first time. The court in Jerusalem is depicted as a nexus of factions and interest groups, and Salina Alexandra, Aristobulus's wife and the first Hasmonean queen, is reported to have intervened in the power struggles. Josephus's account of Aristobulus's short reign thus reflects a political system that is more complex and stringently organized than commonly assumed. Although its focus on the dynasty generated tension, the structure proved to be remarkably stable.

Keywords: Flavius Josephus, Judah Aristobulus I, Hasmonean dynasty, Hasmonean Judea.

In the fall of 104 BCE, Jerusalem was in turmoil. While the king, Judah Aristobulus I, lay sick in bed, Antigonus, his brother and right-hand man, returned from a successful military campaign. He and his soldiers had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles, and the assembled crowd enthusiastically greeted the victorious army and its commander. However, following the public festivities and offerings in the Temple, Antigonus was murdered on the king's directive due to allegations of treason.¹

¹ Josephus, *BJ* 1.70–85; *AJ* 13.301–323.

We know of these events through Flavius Josephus's *Bellum Iudaicum* and *Antiquitates Iudaicae*. These are the only extant sources that relate the story, but Josephus's accounts are extensive, allowing for a closer analysis of the narrative and the historical event. Although written at least a decade apart from each other, the two accounts are very similar, indicating that Josephus based the passage in the *Antiquitates* on his earlier composition.² In both accounts, Josephus emphasizes that Antigonus did not attempt to overthrow his brother and was not killed in a fraternal power struggle. Instead, he fell victim to a conspiracy of a group of courtiers and the queen, who presumably sought to prevent him from succeeding the dying king on the throne. In an elaborate scheme, they convinced Aristobulus that his brother had aimed for more than being just second-in-command. At the same time, they framed Antigonus and persuaded him to visit the king in full armor. Not suspecting any foul play, Antigonus followed this instruction and, bursting with pride, prepared to present himself in all his military glory to his bedridden brother. Yet, when he entered the passageway leading from the Temple to the citadel, the royal guards adhered to the order they had received from the king. Interpreting Antigonus's armor as proof that he was attempting a coup, they struck him down.³ In Josephus's accounts, Aristobulus succumbs to his illness shortly after Antigonus's demise. Before he dies an agonizing death, the king expresses remorse and accepts his end as divine punishment.⁴ After Aristobulus's death, the queen once again assumes agency. She frees the other brothers, whom her late husband had imprisoned at the beginning of his reign, and establishes one of them, Alexander Jannaeus, on the throne.⁵

Josephus presents a riveting story, rife with intrigue, jealousy, tragedy, and remorse. However, despite the drama and the lengthy, elaborate accounts, Antigonus's alleged coup has not received much attention in modern scholarship. This oversight is, to some degree, not surprising; after all, Aristobulus ruled for less than a year.⁶ Even more so, at first glance, his short reign appears as a mere transitional period, sandwiched between the long and crucial tenures of John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus, who ruled for 31 and 27 years, respectively.⁷ The scholarly attention that Aristobulus has received has been mostly concentrated on two issues: his adoption of the royal title and the conquest and subsequent Judaization of territories in Galilee, both mentioned by Josephus.⁸ To be

² Cf. Sievers 2001, 218–223.

³ Josephus, *BJ* 1.73–77; *AJ* 13.304–310.

⁴ Josephus, *BJ* 1.83–84; *AJ* 13.316–318.

⁵ Josephus, *BJ* 1.85; *AJ* 13.320, 323.

⁶ Josephus, *BJ* 1.84; *AJ* 13.318; 20.240–241. For general discussions of Aristobulus's reign see, for instance, VanderKam 2004, 312–318; Dąbrowa 2010, 84–86; Atkinson 2016, 80–99. Berlin and Kosmin (2021b, 1) define the period of the “Middle Maccabees” as ending in 104 BCE with the death of John Hyrcanus, although they point to the expansions under Alexander Jannaeus as the main reason for this definition.

⁷ Cf. Josephus, *BJ* 1.68, 106; *AJ* 13.299, 404; 20.240, 242.

⁸ Adoption of the royal title: Josephus, *BJ* 1.70; *AJ* 13.301–302; Strabo (16.2.40) instead names Alexander Jannaeus as the first Hasmonean king. Conquest and Judaization of Galilee: Josephus, *BJ* 1.76; *AJ* 13.304, 308. Josephus's reports do not allow a detailed reconstruction of the conquests under Aristobulus. In *AJ* 13.318, he states, based on Strabo, that Aristobulus forced the Itureans to Judaize or leave their country. However, in *BJ* 1.76, Antigonus is said to have captured armor and weapons in Galilee. Since the exact location and scope of the conquests are not of importance for the following discussion, it will be assumed that Antigonus campaigned in Upper Galilee. For more recent detailed discussions, including interpretations of the archaeological record, see Berthelot 2018, esp. 260–267, 305–309; Leibner – Sabar 2021; Syon 2021, esp.

sure, these are important aspects of Aristobulus's reign that warrant further discussion, but other aspects have been mostly ignored.

This chapter does not attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of Aristobulus's reign. Instead, it focuses primarily on the story of Antigonus's alleged coup to demonstrate the heuristic potential of such an approach despite the uncertainties about the historical accuracy of Josephus's reports. For this, the Antigonus narrative is approached from two angles. First, it is demonstrated that Josephus portrays Aristobulus's brief reign as an inflection point in his narrative of Hasmonean history, thereby supporting the historian's overall concept of the dynasty's decline. For his account of Aristobulus's tenure, Josephus drew on several sources and made a deliberate decision to focus on Antigonus's fall. Moreover, he used the narrative of Antigonus's tragic death to foreshadow some of the conflict lines that, in the following decades, would rip the dynasty apart. The second part of the chapter turns to a historical analysis of Josephus's accounts. While a detailed factual reconstruction of the affair that led to Antigonus's death is impossible, Aristobulus's reign can still be assessed as marked by a deep political crisis. At the same time, however, a critical reading of Josephus's accounts also allows for a more detailed view of the Hasmonean power structures toward the end of the second century BCE. Read in this light, Josephus's account of Aristobulus's reign rather indicates a formed and remarkably stable system that, despite the turmoil, would continue to exist for several decades, even though internal and external pressures increased.

Josephus on Aristobulus's reign

Considering the brevity of Aristobulus's reign, Josephus devotes significant attention to the king's tenure. In the *Bellum*, Josephus assigns much more space to Aristobulus's one-year tenure than to the three decades that his father and predecessor, John Hyrcanus, ruled over Judea.⁹ The account in the *Antiquitates* is less disproportionate, but the attention given to Aristobulus still suggests a deliberate authorial choice.¹⁰ The two accounts are strikingly similar, suggesting that Josephus drew upon his earlier work when he wrote the pertinent part of Book 13 of the *Antiquitates*. Josephus's reliance on his own work needs to be emphasized. When he wrote the *Antiquitates*, Josephus had additional information and sources on the Hasmonean period at his disposal. Yet, whereas he revised other parts of the narrative significantly,¹¹ he apparently found that the account of Aristobulus's reign in the *Bellum* still suited his needs and intentions. He made some adjustments to his style, revised certain details, and added a concluding section. Most of the

182–190. Atkinson (2016, 87–97) argues for the Gaulanitis instead of Galilee. Shaham (2020, esp. 84–86) confirms the significant output of bronze coins during Aristobulus's reign and draws potential connections to heightened military activity. Coşkun (2019, esp. 381–383) argues that Aristobulus renewed the alliance with Rome; cf. also Seeman 2013, 218–220.

⁹ Compare Josephus, *BJ* 1.56–69 with *BJ* 1.70–85.

¹⁰ Compare Josephus, *AJ* 13.230–266, 273–283, 288–300 with *AJ* 13.301–323.

¹¹ Most prominently, Josephus relied heavily on *1 Maccabees* for his account of Maccabean history in the *Antiquitates*.

narrative's core, however, was kept intact.¹² The following observations, as well as the historical interpretation offered in the second part of this paper, do not parse these differences. Instead, they will discuss the role of the Aristobulus narrative in Josephus's overall assessment of the Hasmonean dynasty as well as a historical interpretation of the Antigonus story.

Josephus's reports on the reign of Aristobulus can be roughly divided into several (more or less) discrete parts:

1. *BJ* 1.70–71; *AJ* 13.301–302: Aristobulus assumes power by overthrowing his mother, to whom John had left the rule of the country, and imprisoning and starving her to death. He also detains his brothers, except for Antigonus. Josephus explains that Aristobulus was also the first Judean ruler to adopt the royal title since the Jewish people's return from the Babylonian exile.

2. *BJ* 1.72–80; *AJ* 13.303–313: This section contains the long narrative about Antigonus's alleged coup, which resulted in the latter's death.

3. *BJ* 1.81–84; *AJ* 13.314–318: Aristobulus expresses remorse for ordering the violent killing of his mother and Antigonus and then dies.

4. *AJ* 13.318–319: In the *Antiquitates*, Josephus intersperses a eulogy in which he names the territorial expansion under Aristobulus as one of his main achievements and calls the late king a Philhellene. He also interjects a quote from Strabo, who, in turn, is said to have based his assessment on Timagenes.¹³

5. *BJ* 1.85; *AJ* 13.320–321: In both the *Bellum* and the *Antiquitates*, the rest of the passage focuses on the aftermath of Aristobulus's death. Salina Alexandra, the late king's widow, briefly assumes power, frees Aristobulus's captive brothers, and establishes one of them, Alexander Jannaeus, on the throne. The two versions differ slightly; most prominently, it is only in the *Antiquitates* that Salina Alexandra is named.

As the sentence distributions in the two works show, the accounts of the court intrigue and Antigonus's demise dominate all other components. Again, a closer look reveals that this focus was the result of deliberate editorial choices and that Josephus used his sources selectively to advance his historiographical agenda. In the *Bellum*, the opening passage of the Aristobulus narrative reads:

After the death of their father, Aristobulus, the eldest of the sons, changed the government into a monarchy, and he was the first to put on the diadem, 471 years and three months after the people had returned to their country, when released from slavery in Babylon. Of the brothers, he seemed to be fond of Antigonus, the next after him, and gave him honors equal to his own. The others he imprisoned in chains. He even put his mother in chains, who had quarreled with him about the authority, because John had left her in charge of the whole realm, and he went so far in his cruelty as to starve her to death in prison.¹⁴

¹² Josephus (*BJ* 1.54–60; *AJ* 13.228–235) followed a similar approach with the story of the death of Simon and hostage-taking of Simon's wife and two of his sons by Ptolemy, son of Abubus; cf. the discussion in Wilker 2017.

¹³ On the juxtaposition of praise and negative assessment in the portrait of Aristobulus in the *Antiquitates* see, for instance, van Henten – Huitink 2018, 265–266.

¹⁴ Μετά γὰρ τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς τελευτὴν ὁ πρεσβύτατος αὐτῶν Ἀριστόβουλος, τὴν ἀρχὴν εἰς βασιλείαν μεταθείς, περιτίθεται μὲν διάδημα πρῶτος μετὰ τετρακοσιοστὸν καὶ ἑβδομηκοστὸν πρῶτον ἔτος, πρὸς δὲ μῆνας τρεῖς, ἐξ οὗ κατῆι ὁ λαὸς εἰς τὴν χώραν ἀπαλλαγείς τῆς ἐν Βαβυλῶνι δουλείας· τῶν δὲ ἀδελφῶν

The short reference to John Hyrcanus's wife is astonishing. In Hasmonean Judea, power was typically defined as a male prerogative and ideally transferred from father to son. Patrilineal succession was considered the norm in most dynastic systems in the Hellenistic world, but in Judea, this concept was of special importance because the Hasmoneans based their system on combining political power with the office of the high priest, a strictly male privilege. John Hyrcanus must have had considerable reasons to name his wife as his heir. Josephus, however, does not provide any explanation for this. Although he reports quite extensively on John's reign, he does not refer to the ruler's wife even once before the fleeting mention of her as John's heir. In a similar fashion, the laconic reference to Aristobulus's violent overthrow of his mother and her cruel death warrants attention. We can assume that such a case of intrafamilial brutality had generated more extensive narratives and was reflected in Josephus's source(s). Yet the historian condenses both Aristobulus's initial coup and the alleged matricide and puts the focus on one of Aristobulus's first executive decisions: his assumption of the diadem.¹⁵

Instead of incorporating dramatic narratives of intradynastic strife, Josephus emphasizes Aristobulus's official embrace of monarchy and marks it as a watershed moment of not only Hasmonean history but post-exilic Judean history in general.¹⁶ At this point, however, Josephus refrains from commenting explicitly on the measure. This changes as the narrative progresses. The repeated references in the following books in both the *Bellum* and the *Antiquitates* that label monarchical rule as a deviation from Judean traditions connect back to this moment and retrospectively identify Aristobulus's reign as a turning point.¹⁷

Similar dynamics are at play in the account of Antigonos's alleged coup. Not only does Josephus dedicate significant space to the story, but Antigonos's fall also marks the first extensive report of intradynastic Hasmonean strife in both of his historical works. The narrative falls neatly into the category of a novelistic court story, in which an all-knowing narrator recounts an intrigue, including the secret intricacies of a complex scheme. The protagonists include anonymous courtiers and the equally conniving queen, who joins them in their plan to dupe the well-meaning but essentially clueless king. The conspiracy story is intertwined with a plot that also follows well-established standards, albeit with a twist. The episode's core seemingly reflects the generic storyline of a young, courageous, and popular competitor who rises against a feeble and inactive king. In this case, however, the clash between these antagonists occurs without either

τὸν μὲν μεθ' ἑαυτὸν Αντίγονον, ἐδόκει γὰρ ἀγαπᾶν, ἦγεν ἰστοτίμως, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους εἴργησσι δῆσας. δεσμεῖ δὲ καὶ τὴν μητέρα διενεχθεῖσαν περὶ τῆς ἐξουσίας, ταύτην γὰρ κυρίαν τῶν ὄλων ὁ Ἰωάννης ἀπολελοῖπει, καὶ μέχρι τοσαύτης ὀμότητος προῆλθεν, ὥστε καὶ λιμῶ διαφθεῖραι δεδεμένην, Josephus, *BJ* 1.70–71 (translation after Thackeray, modified); cf. the parallel in *AJ* 13.301–302.

¹⁵ Josephus, *BJ* 1.70; *AJ* 13.301; cf. *AJ* 20.240–241 (giving the double name Ἰούδας ὁ καὶ Ἀριστόβουλος).

¹⁶ In the *Antiquitates* (*AJ* 13.301–302), written more than a decade later, Josephus retained this emphasis. He tried to correct the chronology and counts 481 years and three months, although this number is still incorrect. However, Josephus's attempted correction shows how critically he engaged with his own previous account when he wrote the *Antiquitates*. That he maintained most of the narrative highlights how well it still fitted his historiographical agenda.

¹⁷ Cf., for instance, the embassy to Pompey in Josephus, *AJ* 14.41 (cf. Diod. 40.2) and the embassy to Augustus in *AJ* 17.304–314. See also *AJ* 4.223–224 (Law of the King); 6.35–44 (Samuel's response to the people's demand for a king).

of them wanting to fight; there is no genuine rivalry. Antigonus is too well-meaning, loyal, and trusting to imagine that his appearance in the citadel in full armor could be misinterpreted, whereas Aristobulus first resists those who accuse Antigonus and, although he eventually gives in, regrets the deed in retrospect.

The historical implications of the event are discussed below, but the story also plays an important role in the structure of Josephus's Hasmonean narrative. What at first reads like a tragic story of intrigue and innocent death becomes, in hindsight, a foreshadowing of the pervasive infighting that dominated the subsequent generations of the dynasty. Similar to Josephus's initial emphasis on Aristobulus's adoption of the royal title, the episode as such does not articulate this intention. However, as the narrative progresses and becomes increasingly a story of intradynastic power struggles and civil war, Josephus's audience cannot help but be reminded of this first instance of internal strife, even though it is presented as fabricated.¹⁸ Josephus thus presents Aristobulus's short reign as a juncture in Hasmonean history that marks a turn for the worse. The adoption of kingship deviated from the ideal of high-priestly rule, although its negative implications showed only in the following years. The contentious rivalry among Hasmonean siblings, even though that between Aristobulus and Antigonus was not of their own doing, ushered in a period of internal strife and eventually caused the dynasty's demise and the loss of Judean independence. In both the *Bellum* and the *Antiquitates*, these implications become apparent only in conjunction with the following narrative. Read against this background, however, the rather lengthy report of Aristobulus's reign and the emphasis on the Antigonus scandal underline that Josephus considered the year 104/103 BCE to be an inflection point in Judean history. Aristobulus's rule was not the nadir of Hasmonean rule, but for Josephus, the king's short tenure already foreshadowed some of the traits that would lead to civil war and Roman occupation.¹⁹

Josephus and his sources

Josephus was able to arrange his narrative according to his agenda because he had ample evidence for the reign of Aristobulus at his disposal. It has been commonly assumed that the main source for this passage is Nicolaus of Damascus. Josephus does not mention Nicolaus in this context, but the narrative's focus on the dynasty and the court, as well as its local knowledge and pathos-laden mode, aligns with what we know about Nicolaus's choice of topics and historiographical style in general.²⁰ Yet Nicolaus's work was not Josephus's only source on Aristobulus. In the *Antiquitates*, Josephus quotes Strabo's positive assessment of the king. Both Strabo's *Historica Hypomnēmata*²¹ and his source

¹⁸ Cf., inter alia, Josephus, *BJ* 1.19, 111–112, 117–122, 160, 171–172; *AJ* 13.432; 14.77, 490–491.

¹⁹ Cf. Piotrkowski 2015, esp. 253–254, who also sees Aristobulus's rule as a turning point in Josephus's narrative but interprets it already as overly negative.

²⁰ Nicolaus is first mentioned in Josephus, *BJ* 1.574, but Josephus does not explicitly state anywhere in the *Bellum* that he has used Nicolaus's work as a source.

²¹ *BNJ* 81 F 11 = *GLAJJ* 100.

for this passage, presumably Timagenes's *Peri Basileōn*,²² are mostly lost, but it is noteworthy that the conquest of the Itureans, highlighted by Strabo, is not elaborated upon in Josephus's report. Similarly, Josephus calls Aristobulus Φιλέλλην, but he leaves the epithet unexplained.²³ Once again, Josephus made a deliberate authorial decision to omit critical information and privilege the story of Antigonus's downfall.²⁴

Josephus further amplified his narrative of the Antigonus scandal by including two vignettes that, in all likelihood, stem from local traditions. Immediately after telling the story of Antigonus's murder, Josephus interjects the story of Judas the Essene, who predicted that Antigonus would die on the day that he eventually did in Strato's Tower. When Judas saw Antigonus in the Temple, he bemoaned what appeared to have been an erroneous prophecy because the Hasmonean could not have reached Strato's Tower, the city on the Mediterranean coast, on the same day. Josephus then clarifies that the passageway in which Antigonus was slaughtered also bore the name Stratonos Pyrgos, thus proving the veracity of the Essene's prediction. The story bears the hallmarks of a local tradition; Judas's identification as an Essene, the insider's knowledge of the corridor leading to the *Baris* (which Judas confuses with the homonymous city), and the story's disconnect from the political dynamics of the event betray a Jerusalem background.²⁵

In a similarly interspersed vignette, Josephus recounts the tense situation at the court after Antigonus's death, when Aristobulus was succumbing to his illness. A servant tasked with disposing of the king's vomited blood accidentally spilled it onto the same spot where Antigonus had been slain shortly before. The incident caused an outcry; anonymous courtiers suspected intent and accused the servant of symbolically condemning the fratricide.²⁶ The episode gives a chilling impression of the atmosphere of fear and suspicion at the court, yet it also reflects a dissenting stance, contradicting the overall tenor of Josephus's story. Whereas Josephus's source emphasizes Aristobulus's innocence, a certain faction at the court was known to condemn the king's actions (see the discussion below). With this, however, the vignette ends. Like Judas's prophecy, it remains isolated from the rest of the narrative. The violent death of the king's brother and right-hand man, only a few months after the same king had violently taken power and imprisoned his relatives, must have shaken the court and society in general. Against this background, it is no surprise that stories, explanations, and gossip multiplied; we may even assume that there were many more.

As seen in the previous discussion, Josephus presents Aristobulus's reign as a hinge between earlier and later periods of Hasmonean history. Highlighting the adoption of monarchy and the intrigue that led to Antigonus's death allowed the historian to adumbrate

²² *BNJ* 88 F 5 = *GLAJJ* 81. Elsewhere, Josephus quotes Timagenes directly, cf. *AJ* 13.344; *c. Ap.* 2.83–84. Cf. the discussion in Shatzman 2014, esp. 221–222.

²³ Josephus, *AJ* 13.318.

²⁴ Since Strabo in the *Geographika* (16.2.40) attributes the shift to a formal monarchy to Aristobulus's successor, Alexander Jannaeus, it is unlikely that his work was the source of the Antigonus story.

²⁵ Josephus, *BJ* 1.78–80; *AJ* 13.311–313. Stories about misinterpreted locations named in prophecies are not limited to Judea. Plutarch in his account of Hannibal's death includes a similar trope (*Flam.* 20.3–5), as does Appian (*Syr.* 62 (332–334)) for Seleucus I Nicator. In the context of Josephus's works, the focus on an Essene prophecy is in line with other instances, including Josephus, *AJ* 15.373–378 (Manaemus for Herod); *BJ* 2.112–113 and *AJ* 17.345–348 (Simon for Archelaus).

²⁶ Josephus, *BJ* 1.81–82; *AJ* 13.314–315.

what he perceived as key issues that would plague the next phases of Hasmonean rule. However, it is only with the following crescendo of dynastic crises that Aristobulus's rule can be identified as the inflection point in Hasmonean history. In the broader context of Josephus's works, the story of Antigonos's alleged coup thus fulfills a function that goes beyond a mere case of riveting court gossip.

The reign of Aristobulus—how many coups?

As captivating as the story of Antigonos's downfall is, reading it as a historical source reveals many breaks, inconsistencies, and improbabilities. First, it remains unclear how the narrator has acquired knowledge of the plot, as it seems unlikely that the conspirators would have advertised their success in misleading the king.²⁷ The scheme also appears overly complicated. After all, the conspirators could have killed Antigonos and fabricated a story of an attempted coup afterward. Furthermore, the narrative focuses entirely on the alleged intrigue; we do not learn why the conspirators objected to Antigonos, nor are their plans for the future made explicit. Finally, whereas Aristobulus shows remorse on his deathbed for ordering the killing of his brother, he does not take retributive action against the conspirators, let alone his wife, for having misled him. Any attempt to reconstruct the events of 104/103 BCE must take these inconsistencies into account. Reading the narrative against the grain suggests three possible scenarios:

1. Antigonos fell victim to a secret plot.

According to Josephus's story, a group of conspirators misled Aristobulus, and Antigonos was removed in a preemptive coup. Antigonos's unprecedented role as a second-in-command must have caused concerns, especially because the king did not have a son to succeed him on the throne. According to Josephus, the tension at the court and the attempts to remove Antigonos from his elevated position had been growing for a while. They escalated at the Festival of Tabernacles, when Antigonos's triumphant return and Aristobulus's worsening health prompted the conspirators to act. Multiple inconsistencies render this story difficult to believe; however, as discussed below, the existence of competing court factions seems plausible, even likely.

2. Antigonos attempted a coup but was struck down during the act.

We may also understand the story of Antigonos's downfall in Josephus's works as a heavily rewritten account of an actual attempt by Antigonos to overthrow his brother. The overall impression of his return in the glory of a recent military victory, his triumphant entrance into the city at the head of his troops, and his self-presentation in the Temple in all his splendor should at least raise suspicion. In this scenario, the coup was stopped while in progress, and the repeated emphasis on the innocence of both Antigonos and Aristobulus reflects later attempts to whitewash Antigonos's record. This apologetic retelling then turns what was, in fact, a fraternal power struggle into a cabal set in motion

²⁷ Josephus, *BJ* 1.84; *AJ* 13.308.

by a group of courtiers and the queen. In light of the intradynastic struggles that dominated the later decades of Hasmonean history, such a reading appears tempting, but it is also not without contradictions. For instance, because Aristobulus was already fatally ill and Antigonus was apparently his designated heir, he could have simply waited instead of risking a violent overturn. It is also not clear who would have benefited from exculpating Antigonus after his death.²⁸

3. Antigonus's intentions were misunderstood, and his murder was an accident.

A third, less dramatic reading of Josephus's presentation suggests a simple misunderstanding. Antigonus may have intended to visit his bedridden soldiers with good intentions, yet his appearance in armor raised the suspicion of the guards, who killed him instead of merely confiscating his weapons. Considering Antigonus's elevated position, this appears unlikely, but not entirely impossible. The conspiracy would then be a later embellishing addition, possibly the product of rumors and attempts to explain the traumatic event. However, the sheer multiplicity of stories that Josephus incorporated into his narrative raises doubts about this interpretation.

Considering the scarce evidence and the story's internal inconsistencies, it remains impossible to decide which of the scenarios is closest to the actual historical event or even the most plausible. Yet despite these limitations, each of the possible reconstructions highlights that Aristobulus's reign marked a moment of significant crisis.

Aristobulus's reign as a systemic crisis

Aristobulus's reign, short as it was, can even be described as an accumulation of crises. As seen above, the king's rule began with a coup when he violently overturned his father's will, toppled his mother, and imprisoned her and three of his brothers.²⁹ Although Josephus is strikingly restrained in reporting what must have been a series of turbulent events, his brief mention of Aristobulus having starved his mother to death reflects this turmoil. It is impossible to determine whether this allegation has any foundation in reality, but the charge raises doubts. Matricide, especially of such a cruel sort, was a widespread defamation launched against (alleged) tyrants in antiquity.³⁰ Even if Aristobulus indeed murdered his mother in the way described, it is highly unlikely that he would have publicized the deed. The rumors about the cause of her death thus presumably go back to oppositional circles who first had supported his mother's claim to the throne and now aimed to discredit the new king. However,

²⁸ That the personal names Aristobulus and Antigonus remained in use in the Hasmonean family also renders a deadly power struggle between the two less likely.

²⁹ Josephus, *BJ* 1.71; *AJ* 13.302.

³⁰ Accusations of matricide were, for instance, raised against Antiochus VIII Grypus (*Iust.* 39.2.7–8); Ptolemy X Alexander (*Iust.*, *epit.* 39.4.3–5.1); and Mithradates VI Eupator of Pontus (Memnon, *BNJ* 434 F 1.22.2; App. *Mithr.* 112 (549)). In all of these cases, the son kills his mother to gain sole power. The most prominent Roman case is that of Nero against Agrippina (Suet. *Nero* 34.2–4; Tac. *Ann.* 14.3.1–11.3), but Suetonius also relates the rumor that Vitellius starved his mother to death (*Vit.* 14.4).

such rumors also reflect the shock and trauma that the first violent strife within the Hasmonean dynasty caused.³¹

The subsequent military campaign in Galilee might have indicated a short period of political stability reflected in the enthusiastic welcome the crowd in Jerusalem accorded to the victorious troops and to Antigonus as their commander.³² However, the festive atmosphere was abruptly brought to an end by Antigonus's alleged coup and death. The sense of a widespread crisis must have increased even further when Aristobulus succumbed to illness shortly afterward. No children are reported for the king and his wife, and Josephus does not report any arrangement as to who should follow him on the throne. Considering the king's prolonged illness, the absence of such an arrangement appears astonishing, but if there had been any plans, they were reversed immediately after his death. Queen Salina Alexandra assumed power and freed Aristobulus's three imprisoned brothers. Josephus explicitly states that the queen chose Alexander Jannaeus to take the throne because he was considered the best option due to his seniority and his "moderation" (μετριότης), suggesting that Alexander had been the conspirators' desired candidate all along.³³ However, even the establishment of the new king did not end the crisis. In a laconic fashion, similar to his thin-lipped report of Aristobulus's initial coup, Josephus continues that Alexander immediately executed one of the brothers who had been freed with him because he considered him a rival. The remaining brother, Absalom, was allowed to live only because he showed no interest in political power.³⁴

There would be much more to discuss regarding each of these events, but taken together, they reflect a period of existential crisis, beginning with John Hyrcanus's death after a long and successful reign. The previous decades of Hasmonean rule had been far from devoid of internal tensions,³⁵ but in 104/103 BCE, the conflicts within the dynasty escalated into a spiral of violence and mutual suspicion. Over the course of only one year, five members of the ruling dynasty died: John Hyrcanus, his anonymous wife, Antigonus, Aristobulus, and the anonymous brother slain by Alexander Jannaeus. Of these, all but John Hyrcanus and Aristobulus died a violent death, either because they were aiming for power or suspected of doing so. Against this backdrop, Josephus, who exculpates Aristobulus and Antigonus and only briefly mentions the other killings, appears to have painted a strikingly rosy picture. As seen above, this presentation served Josephus's historiographical agenda. In the historical situation, however, the rapid sequence of traumatic events must have been experienced as a crisis of cataclysmic proportions—a series of chaos, bloodshed, and disruption that shook political Jerusalem at its core. The local traditions about Judas prophesying Antigonus's death and the servant spilling

³¹ To some extent, the murder of Simon at the hands of his son-in-law, Ptolemy, the son of Abubus, can also be counted as an intradynastic strife. However, both *1 Macc* (14:11–21) and Josephus (*BJ* 1.54–60; *AJ* 13.228–235) frame Ptolemy as an outsider. Cf. Wilker 2017.

³² Josephus, *BJ* 1.73, 76; *AJ* 13.304–305, 308. Cf. Shaham 2020, 85–86, who interprets the wide circulation of Aristobulus's bronze coinage as an indication for "high public confidence."

³³ Josephus, *BJ* 1.85; *AJ* 13.320–321.

³⁴ Josephus, *BJ* 1.85; *AJ* 13.323. Absalom is left anonymous in this passage but mentioned again in Josephus, *AJ* 14.71 as father-in-law of Aristobulus II, when he was taken captive during Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem.

³⁵ Cf. Josephus, *BJ* 1.67; *AJ* 13.296–297, 299.

Aristobulus's blood reflect the widespread notion of confusion and mistrust embedded in the Judean collective memory.

The sparse information provided by Josephus does not permit a clear reconstruction of the individual events. Yet the historian's accounts of Antigonus's death and Aristobulus's reign in general also offer additional information. If we shift our focus from the scandal itself to its framework—the general circumstances in which the narrative situates the dramatic events—we gain insights into the power structure that marks the end of the second century BCE as a distinct phase in Hasmonean history.

Aristobulus's reign and the Hasmonean power structure

While Josephus's primary source remains unknown, the core of Antigonus's story presumably emerged shortly after the event. Its clear agenda to exonerate both Aristobulus and Antigonus would have increasingly lost its relevance as time passed. In turn, the inserted vignettes of Judas the Essene and the servant who spilled Aristobulus's blood evoke and respond to the tense atmosphere in the direct aftermath of the brothers' deaths. As shown above, several of the extraordinary, salient components of Josephus's narrative strain plausibility in the factual sense; however, they reflect a contemporary need to make sense of events that must have been experienced as confusing and disturbing.

Reading the story of Antigonus's downfall in this light opens up another analytical register. Whereas the narrative of the events is likely shaped by gossip and rumors, its scaffolding depends on assumptions and figurations that were taken as given. Focusing on what the plot assumes as normal or even normative, the backdrop against which the extraordinary unfolds, thus allows rare insights into contemporary political imaginaries.³⁶ Following their novelistic character, Josephus's accounts are strictly concentrated on the center of power: the ruler, his relatives, and the courtiers. The people of Jerusalem, the pilgrims who attended the festival, and the soldiers are mentioned, but they remain mostly staffage and play only minimal roles as the situation develops. Other significant social groups, such as the priests, are not mentioned at all. Thus, the passage presents a distorted and incomplete picture, but its emphasis is also instructive. What emerges from this perspective is the notion of a complex political structure in which power and influence were highly concentrated and extended in concentric circles, comprising the king, the dynasty, and the court.

Kingship and representation

As seen above, Josephus highlights Aristobulus's assumption of the royal title as one of the main markers of his reign, and Aristobulus is consequently labeled *basileus* in both

³⁶ For reading rumors as historical sources, see already Lefebvre 1982 (*La Grande Peur de 1789*, first published 1932), esp. part II, ch. 1; for more general methodological discussions, see Gosh 2008; Jobs 2020.

accounts. However, Josephus does not discuss what prompted the formal adoption of monarchy. The new title presumably helped put the Judean ruler on a par with neighboring powers, and it signaled a boost in status more generally, but the organizing principles of Hasmonean power seem to have been maintained.³⁷ It also appears unlikely that this option had not been discussed in some circles before. However, whereas John Hyrcanus apparently did not find it helpful or necessary to adopt the royal title, Aristobulus was under greater pressure to solidify his position, especially after he had seized the throne violently, against the will of his late father, by overthrowing his mother. The royal title underlined that the ruler's authority was central and not to be disputed. This concept also becomes evident even in the story of Antigonus's alleged coup, as told by Josephus. Although Aristobulus is presented as falling for the conspirators' evil machinations, it is by his order that Antigonus is killed. The queen distorts the king's message to Antigonus, and Aristobulus appears duped, yet official power continues to reside with the ruler.³⁸

Even though Aristobulus gained further prestige through the royal title, political authority remained only one component of Hasmonean power. Ever since Jonathan was established as Jewish high priest by Alexander Balas in 152 BCE, the highest religious authority served as one of the main pillars of Maccabean legitimacy.³⁹ The Bronze Tablet Decree, quoted in the *First Book of Maccabees*, records the confirmation of Simon, Jonathan's brother and successor, as high priest (ἀρχιερεύς), political leader (ἡγούμενος), and commander of the military (στρατηγός) in 140 BCE by "the great assembly of priests and people and rulers of the nation and the elders of the land."⁴⁰ This unprecedented combination of the high priesthood, political authority, and military command formed the basis of Hasmonean power. It also lies at the heart of the story of Antigonus's downfall.

Josephus does not explain the concerns that drove the conspirators to act against Antigonus, but he suggests that they had been harboring misgivings for a while and had already tried to rouse Aristobulus against his brother. They were instigated to try again when Antigonus returned to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. As high priest, Aristobulus should have led the Sukkot ritual at the Temple, but his illness prohibited him from fulfilling his priestly duty and showing himself as the legitimate religious leader.⁴¹ Antigonus, in contrast, was not only present, but he arrived at the head of his troops, literally in shining armor and further adorned by the booty and glory gained in his recent Galilean victories. Again, Josephus remains unspecific about Antigonus's participation in the rituals; he is described as attending the festival, going up to the

³⁷ Aristobulus's adoption of kingship has been widely discussed in modern scholarship; for more recent discussions (and references to previous scholarship) see, inter alia, Regev 2013, 129–174; Trampedach 2013, esp. 249–254; Piotrkowski 2015; Babota 2020; Dąbrowa 2021; Eckhardt 2021, esp. 360–362.

³⁸ Josephus, *BJ* 1.75–76; *AJ* 13.308–310.

³⁹ *I Macc* 10:18–21; Josephus, *AJ* 13.43–46.

⁴⁰ *I Macc* 14:25–49.

⁴¹ For the relevance especially of Sukkot in the context of Maccabean/Hasmonean self-presentation, see Rubenstein 1995, 56–64, 80–81. Cf. in particular Jonathan's first performance as high priest on the Festival of Sukkot (*I Macc* 10:21; Josephus, *AJ* 13.46). In *AJ* 15.50–52, Josephus describes how Aristobulus III's performance of the Sukkot ritual made such an impression on the people that Herod feared they would prefer the young Hasmonean to him. Josephus, *BJ* 1.437 does not specify the festival but still underlines the impressiveness of the event. In turn, Alexander Jannaeus was pelted with citrons by the people during the Sukkot festivities (*AJ* 13.372).

Temple, and offering prayers for his brother's recovery. It appears possible that Antigonus acted as a substitute for his brother,⁴² but even without such speculation, the contrast between the absent and feeble current high priest and a potential successor in his prime must have been glaringly obvious.⁴³ It is thus not surprising that in Josephus's story, this is the moment when the conspirators finally persuade Aristobulus that Antigonus is up to no good.⁴⁴ The combined celebration of a military victory and one of the main religious festivals was a powerful reminder of what defined Hasmonean power, yet in this instance, it was performed not by the current king but by his brother. The fact that the situation was particularly charged, regardless of Antigonus's actual intentions, is further underscored by the symbolism of space; after all, Antigonus was killed in the passageway that connected the Temple to the *Baris*.⁴⁵ The fortress had been built by John Hyrcanus as his new residence; it was also where the high priestly garments were stored, signifying the unity of religious and political authority. In Josephus's story, the murder of Antigonus as he was making his way from the Temple to the king's palace marks the climax of suspense. Beyond the concrete historical situation, it also indicates how strongly the core concept of Hasmonean power was established in Jerusalem—politically, ideologically, and topographically.

The story of Antigonus's alleged coup is primarily about power, but the plot also highlights another aspect of Hasmonean rule that is commonly overlooked: performance and self-presentation.⁴⁶ Aristobulus was the first to adopt the royal title, but it is for his brother Antigonus that we have one of the few descriptions of Hasmonean representation. Josephus describes Antigonus's appearance in Jerusalem in remarkable detail. The splendor of his armor, the spectacle of his soldiers, the rich war spoils, and his ostentatious performance in the Temple made him the focus of public attention. His entry into Jerusalem at the head of his troops and his ascent to the Temple with a military escort were at least ambiguous; they could be read as a military intervention, a mode of intimidation, or as a conspicuous display of his military prowess. Based on Josephus's description, it was primarily not the threat of violence but the ostentatious performance that was interpreted as status usurpation. In turn, the display of wealth, glory, and quasi-royal honors served as the conspirators' main argument to raise Aristobulus's suspicions.

Although Antigonus never assumed the highest position, the episode offers one of the most detailed descriptions of the self-presentation of Hasmonean rulers. The preceding sections in the *Bellum* and the *Antiquitates*, as well as in the *First Book of Maccabees*, rarely comment on Hasmonean symbols of authority or public appearances. When Jonathan was invited by Ptolemy VI to attend the wedding of Cleopatra Thea and Alexander Balas in Ptolemais in 152 BCE, *1 Maccabees* proudly describes how the Ptolemaic king honored him with a purple cloak and assigned him a seat on the podium next to himself and the groom. Shortly thereafter, the Seleucid king sent Jonathan a golden

⁴² Cf. Rubenstein 1995, 81; VanderKam 2004, 316. According to 2 *Macc* 4:29, Lysimachus served as surrogate for his brother Menelaus while the high priest was away (τῆς ἀρχιερωσύνης διάδοχον).

⁴³ The phrasing in Josephus, *BJ* 1.73 is ambiguous (προσκυνησαι τὸ πλέον ὑπὲρ τὰδελφοῦ), but *AJ* 13.304 clearly implies that Antigonus prayed for his brother's recuperation.

⁴⁴ Josephus, *BJ* 1.72–74; *AJ* 13.304–306.

⁴⁵ Josephus, *BJ* 1.75; *AJ* 15.403–405; 18.90–92 (see below, n. 76).

⁴⁶ Dąbrowa 2024 offers first more extensive study of Hasmonean paraphernalia and symbols of power.

brooch.⁴⁷ More specific is the text of the Bronze Tablet Decree. Here, Simon receives the monopoly of wearing a purple cloak and a golden brooch, effectively turning the accessories of Seleucid *philo*i into the insignia of the Judean ruler. Yet neither *I Maccabees* nor Josephus refers to these insignia again.⁴⁸ The formal adoption of kingship may have brought additional symbolic markers, and Josephus describes Aristobulus's move as "putting on the diadem."⁴⁹ While the turn of phrase does not necessarily have to be read literally,⁵⁰ there is good reason to do so in this case. After all, the coins of Aristobulus's successor, Alexander Jannaeus, proudly display not only the royal title but also a stylized diadem.⁵¹ Following Josephus's description, Antigonus did not go so far as donning a diadem, but his self-presentation was still dangerously close to the register of royal ostentation. It was recognized as intentional, signifying that Antigonus sought the additional nimbus of kingship.⁵²

The dynastic structure: Reassessing Antigonus's position

The discussion above identified the year 104/103 BCE as a time of crisis that featured multiple power struggles and the violent deaths of three (potential) candidates for the throne. Retrospectively, it appears self-evident that all of these contenders came from the ruling family. However, a historical reading of Josephus's reports on Aristobulus underscores how deeply the dynasty defined every aspect of the Hasmonean power structure less than 50 years after Jonathan had become the first Maccabean high priest.⁵³ We know, of course, of circles opposed to Hasmonean rule, including, but not limited to, the sectarian movement at Qumran.⁵⁴ Yet, by the end of the second century BCE, power in Judea was considered, first and foremost, a Hasmonean prerogative, solidified in the reality of power politics and in ideology. In this context, the emphasis on the dynasty,

⁴⁷ *I Macc* 10:20, 88–89; Josephus, *AJ* 13.83–85; for the continuation of Jonathan's honors in the hierarchy of Seleucid *philo*i under Demetrius II, see *I Macc* 11:26–37; Antiochus VI confirms Jonathan's rank among the *philo*i, sends him golden vessels, and grants him the right to wear the golden brooch and eat from golden tableware, although it is not explained if Jonathan put these rights into practice, *I Macc* 11:56–58; *AJ* 13.145–146. cf. Dąbrowa 2024, 176–177.

⁴⁸ *I Macc* 14:43–45. In *I Macc* 15:32, the Seleucid envoy Athenobius is described as struck by the ostentatious wealth on display in Simon's palace; Dąbrowa 2024, 178–179. According to *BJ* 1.132, Aristobulus II presented himself before Pompey "in the most kingly way" (παρῆν τε καὶ αὐτὸς ὡς οἶόν τε βασιλικώτατα κεκοσμηκῶς ἑαυτόν); the parallel passage in *AJ* 14.45 describes Aristobulus's companions wearing purple cloaks, long hair, and metal ornaments.

⁴⁹ Josephus, *BJ* 1.70; *AJ* 13.301; 20.241.

⁵⁰ For putting on the diadem as a standard metaphor for the assumption of kingship, cf. *I Macc* 1:9; 6:15; 8:14; 11:13, 54; 12:39; 13:32; Polyb. 4.48.10–12; 5.42.7, 57.2; Diod. 20.53.2; 33.28; 36.2.4; Plut. *mor.* 184B; *Demetrius* 18.1.

⁵¹ Meshorer 2001, 209, group K (p. 301, pl. 25); cf. Meshorer 2001, 39–40; Dąbrowa 2024, 179–180.

⁵² Josephus, *BJ* 1.73–74; *AJ* 13.304–306.

⁵³ *I Macc* 10:21; Josephus, *AJ* 13.46.

⁵⁴ For opposition against Hasmonean rule under John Hyrcanus see also Josephus, *BJ* 1.67; *AJ* 13.288–296, 299; cf. for instance, the discussion in Eckhardt 2016. *4Q Testimonia* (= 4Q175) may allude specifically to John Hyrcanus and the deaths of Antigonus and Aristobulus, cf. Eshel 2008, 63–87.

which becomes apparent in the *First Book of Maccabees*, presumably written during the rule of John Hyrcanus, reflects both the need to justify the family's elevated position and the prospective dimension that power in Judea was to remain in Hasmonean hands. The violent rivalries that escalated during the time of Aristobulus were the flipside of this privilege. The relative stability of the dynastic principle limited the pool of legitimate candidates for the throne, but it also heightened the rivalry among them. These dynamics dominated every aspect of Aristobulus's reign. To gain power, he had to overthrow his mother and imprison three of his brothers.⁵⁵ A year later, Alexander Jannaeus demonstrated that this behavior was not solely the result of Aristobulus's paranoia. As soon as he was established in power, Alexander executed one of his brothers, whom he considered a potential rival.⁵⁶ In this scenario, Antigonus was an almost astonishing exception. Aristobulus not only initially spared him but also trusted him with the army and made him second-in-command.

The dramatic events that dominate Josephus's accounts overshadow the role that the new king assigned to Antigonus, and the story's emotive tone accentuates their brotherly love over dynastic and political concerns. Nonetheless, the narrative allows for a basic reconstruction of Antigonus's position. According to Josephus, Antigonus played a significant role in his brother's administration from the very beginning, and we may infer that he supported Aristobulus's power grab.⁵⁷ His elevated position becomes most concrete in his command of the Galilean campaign. Entrusting administrative tasks or military assignments to a male relative was hardly a novelty in the Hasmonean system. Among the first generation of Maccabean rulers, Judas and Jonathan had already entrusted their brothers with the most significant positions. Simon's sons commanded troops against Cendebaeus, and he assigned his son, John Hyrcanus, to govern the district of Gezer.⁵⁸ John, in turn, sent Aristobulus and Antigonus to jointly lead the fight against Antiochus Cyzicenus.⁵⁹ Despite these precedents, Antigonus's role under Aristobulus's kingship still amounted to a new invention. Josephus describes him explicitly as "an equal partner in the kingdom" (τῆς βασιλείας κοινωνός).⁶⁰ The phrasing indicates that Antigonus's position did not come with an official title, but his demeanor and the allegations put in the conspirators' mouths confirm that he was perceived as *de facto* holding a share of the royal power.⁶¹ The king's ill health may have played a role in his decision to rely increasingly on his brother, as this constellation helped project the supremacy of the dynasty and provided added stability. Yet the king's absence from the public eye and his reduced capacities also turned Antigonus's elevated position into a vital threat. Regardless of Antigonus's actual intentions, the combination of dynastic charisma and individual success could easily be perceived as factors prompting him to make a play for power.

⁵⁵ The tradition that John Hyrcanus sent Alexander Jannaeus away so that he would not succeed him in the leadership (Josephus, *AJ* 13.321–322; cf. *BJ* 1.69) is clearly anachronistic.

⁵⁶ Josephus, *BJ* 1.85; *AJ* 13.323.

⁵⁷ Josephus, *BJ* 1.71–72; *AJ* 13.302.

⁵⁸ *I Macc* 16:1–10, 19; *AJ* 13.226–227.

⁵⁹ Josephus, *BJ* 1.52, 64–66; *AJ* 13.274–277, 300.

⁶⁰ Josephus, *BJ* 1.72; cf. similar expressions in *BJ* 1.71, 74; *AJ* 13.303. *AJ* 13.302 reads τοῦτον μὲν τῶν ὁμοίων ἡξίτου.

⁶¹ Josephus, *BJ* 1.73–74; *AJ* 13.305–306.

The queen: Salina Alexandra

Another result of a solidified dynastic system was the emergence of Aristobulus's wife, Salina Alexandra, as one of the story's protagonists. Her husband's shift to a formal monarchy meant that, for the first time in the Second Temple Period, there was also a title for his consort, and both the *Bellum* and the *Antiquitates* consequently refer to Salina Alexandra as *basilissa*.⁶² It remains unknown whether Salina Alexandra was formally crowned queen, yet the fact that she assumed the royal title already indicates a formal acknowledgment of her official role and status. Unlike its male derivative, being named *basilissa* in the Hellenistic world did not automatically convey authority, let alone sovereignty.⁶³ However, Josephus's reports on Aristobulus's reign allow us to better understand the role and perception of queens in the new Hasmonean monarchy.

Josephus does not present Salina Alexandra as the primary instigator against Antigonus, but she is in cahoots with the other conspirators and instrumental to the plot's success. When the unsuspecting Antigonus is invited to visit the bedridden king, Salina Alexandra tells the messenger to alter the instructions and direct Antigonus to come in arms. The intricate scheme thus purports that her order will be followed, and thanks to her intervention, Antigonus is lured into the trap.⁶⁴ The queen appears again after Aristobulus's death. Josephus's report on the aftermath of the king's passing is rather short, but it clearly states that Salina Alexandra played an even more significant role in this context. In the absence of an official heir to the throne, she assumed authority and freed the imprisoned brothers. Once again, the guardians followed her orders without hesitation. Even more so, Josephus relates that Salina Alexandra was the one who selected and established Alexander Jannaeus as the next king because she deemed him the best fit for the office.⁶⁵ It is left unclear if Alexander Jannaeus's succession had been part of the conspirators' plan all along, but in the power vacuum that followed Aristobulus's death, Salina Alexandra was the highest-ranking member of the dynasty in freedom, and she acted accordingly. Her influence and authority in this situation cannot be overestimated.⁶⁶

Judea had had an official queen for less than a year, but Salina Alexandra already appears so firmly established in her elevated role that the narrative does not even explain her eminence. Regardless of whether her involvement in the conspiracy is historically accurate, the scenario was deemed plausible and reflects her status as a major figure in the dynastic and political structure. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that she was also the first Hasmonean woman whose name—or rather whose two names—have survived.⁶⁷ In one of the few additions to the story as related in the *Bellum*, Josephus includes in the *Antiquities* narrative that she was “Salina, [...] called Alexandra by the Greeks”

⁶² Josephus, *BJ* 1.76; *AJ* 13.308.

⁶³ Cf., inter alia, Carney 1991; Bielman Sánchez 2003, 51–52; Savalli-Lestrade 2003, esp. 65, 73; Carney 2010, 202.

⁶⁴ Josephus, *BJ* 1.76; *AJ* 13.308–309.

⁶⁵ Josephus, *BJ* 1.85; *AJ* 13.320–321.

⁶⁶ Wilker 2016, 243–245; Wilker 2021, esp. 225–226.

⁶⁷ References to earlier Hasmonean women are sparse; if they are mentioned, they are identified solely through their male relatives; cf. Wilker 2016, 232–243; Wilker 2021, 223–225.

(Σαλίνα [...] λεγομένη δὲ ὑπὸ Ἑλλήνων Ἀλεξάνδρα).⁶⁸ It remains unclear if Ἑλληνες in this context refers to the works of Greek authors, such as Timagenes and Strabo, or is used in a more general sense. However, in either case, the double name is instructive. It demonstrates that the queen not only played a decisive role behind the scenes but also acted in some representative capacity and was well known even beyond the local sphere.

Whereas Salina Alexandra was the first Hasmonean woman whose name has been preserved, she was not the first to play a significant role in the dynasty's rule. As seen above, John Hyrcanus had designated his wife to succeed him, and it was only due to Aristobulus's coup that Judea did not become ruled by a woman at that time. The reasons for John Hyrcanus's decision remain elusive, especially since he had five sons, but it indicates that during his 31-year reign, his wife had proven herself to be a skillful politician and capable counselor whom he trusted to succeed. That royal women exercised authority was far less exceptional in the Hellenistic world than has been assumed in traditional scholarship.⁶⁹ However, as pointed out above, the combination of political power with the high priesthood was essential for the Hasmoneans, and a female ruler would have meant dividing the two positions.⁷⁰ Josephus's meager reference does not indicate what John Hyrcanus's plans entailed, but he must have assumed that his wife would enjoy considerable support from the elites, the administration, and the people. This support turned out to be insufficient in her confrontation with her son, but Aristobulus deemed it necessary to hold her captive (and was even said to have starved her to death) to safeguard his own power.

Salina Alexandra's possible involvement in Antigonus's downfall and decisive actions after Aristobulus's death are thus remarkable, but they also need to be integrated into a long-term development that saw Hasmonean women increasingly wielding influence.⁷¹ Although neither Salina Alexandra nor her predecessor enjoyed official power, both established themselves as power brokers and important political figures at the court. This process was further amplified during the reign of Aristobulus, as the leading female Hasmonean now gained an official title, and Salina Alexandra decided to take the reins in the power vacuum following the king's death. However, we no longer hear of her after Alexander Jannaeus's establishment on the throne; she vanishes from Josephus's accounts, becoming just one of the many loose ends in the story. Nonetheless, it is in Antigonus's story and the aftermath of Aristobulus's death that a Hasmonean woman is described for the first time as intervening in political affairs and assuming authority. Again, Aristobulus's reign formed a step in a longer process. In 76 BCE, Salina Alexandra's sister-in-law, Salome Alexandra, assumed formal rule after the death of her husband, Alexander Jannaeus.⁷²

⁶⁸ Josephus, *AJ* 13.320.

⁶⁹ Among several recent publications on Hellenistic royal women cf., for instance, the contributions in Coşkun – McAuley 2016; Carney – Müller 2021, as well as Kunst 2021.

⁷⁰ This division was put into practice under Salome Alexandra, who became queen regnant after the death of her husband Alexander Jannaeus. Her son, Hyrcanus II, assumed the high priesthood. Salina Alexandra and Salome Alexandra are often presumed to be the same person. Although already Eusebius (Euseb. *chron.* (ed. Schoene) 1.130, cf. Hieron. *chron.* 1941) makes this identification, there is no reason for this assumption. For a discussion of the evidence and broader circumstances, see especially Ilan 1993; Ilan 1995, 155–157; Ilan 2006, 50–58; Atkinson 2016, 85–86; Wilker 2017, 245; Wilker 2021, 226; Scales – Turner 2024.

⁷¹ Sievers 1988; Wilker 2016; Wilker 2017; Wilker 2021; Ilan 2022, esp. 22–27.

⁷² Josephus, *BJ* 1.107; *AJ* 13.308–495.

The court

As seen above, the supremacy of the dynasty formed the core of the Hasmonean system, both ideologically and in practice. The intrafamilial rivalry, the elevated position of Antigonus, and the role of the queen as one of the main power brokers were all components of a stable and increasingly complex dynastic structure. The evolution of this system becomes apparent in the earlier parts of Josephus's account of Hasmonean history, especially in the *Antiquitates*, but it is shown in unique density in the Aristobulus narrative. Yet, there is an additional important aspect that appears here for the first time: an established court, both in terms of space and as a political and social system.⁷³

The story of Antigonus's downfall is confined to Jerusalem. Galilee is referenced briefly as the area of Antigonus's campaign, but the plot focuses entirely on the capital. Within the city, the Temple is assigned significance as the primary location of the Sukkot festival and Antigonus's most stunning public appearance. It is also here that Judas the Essene sees Antigonus and bemoans having erred in his prophecy. The main parts of the narrative, however, take place at the court. The palace functions as the space of interaction between the main actors, including the king, the queen, and Antigonus, as well as groups of different statuses and interests, such as courtiers, guards, and servants. Within the palace, the plot unfolds in various locations: the king's bedchamber, hallways, undefined areas where the conspirators converse, and the dimly lit passageway (σκοτεινή πάροδος)⁷⁴ that connects the residence to the Temple. Although not explicitly stated, it is possible that Aristobulus's mother and brothers were also imprisoned here. Josephus identifies this center of Hasmonean power—described here for the first time as an actual architectural setting⁷⁵—as the *Baris*, the fortified mansion built by John Hyrcanus at the northwestern corner of the Temple Mount. The *Baris* provided a secure place to store the high-priestly vestments and presumably replaced the *Akra* as John's primary residence. The fortress also served to protect the city from the north and to control the area of the Temple; the corridor where Antigonus was murdered allowed the ruling Hasmonean to move safely between his house and the sanctuary.⁷⁶ The plot of the Antigonus story is interwoven with the spatial setting. The various actors are familiar with the architectural layout; they share a social environment, recognize each other, and anticipate the movements of their counterparts.

Aristobulus's reign also marks the first time that Josephus addresses the Hasmonean court—a social and political nexus that includes more people than the ruler's immediate

⁷³ For the later Hasmonean court see, for instance, Dąbrowa 2010, 126–129.

⁷⁴ Josephus, *BJ* 1.77; cf. *BJ* 1.75. *AJ* 13.307, 313 has ὑπόγειον (ἄφώτιστον).

⁷⁵ Other palaces mentioned in the Maccabean/Hasmonean narratives include the fortress of Dagon/Doq (*I Macc* 16.15; *BJ* 1.56; *AJ* 13.230) and the *Akra* in Jerusalem (*I Macc* 13:52; 14:7; 15:28; Josephus, *BJ* 1.50; *AJ* 13.215–217), but their architectural setting is not described.

⁷⁶ For the *Baris* as the main Hasmonean residence cf. Josephus, *BJ* 1.75, 118, 121–122, 401; *AJ* 15.403–405; 18.90–92. For its location and identification of the sparse archaeological remains due to Herod's *Antonia* and later buildings cf. Bahat 2011; Bahat 2015; Bieberstein 2017, 114; Cabaret 2022, esp. 37–40; Magness 2024, 165–166. A second palace was built under Aristobulus II (Josephus, *AJ* 14.59, cf. *BJ* 1.250–251; Bieberstein 2017, 115). Before the building of the *Baris*, the Maccabean leaders apparently resided in the *Akra*, cf. *I Macc* 13:52 (against Josephus, who declares that Simon razed the fortress; Josephus, *BJ* 1.50; *AJ* 13.215–217); cf. Zilberstein 2021, esp. 49–51; Zilberstein 2025.

kin. Whereas the sources mention a few supporters and officials of the emerging Hasmonean state before, it is here that a group that can be adequately described as “courtiers” plays a significant role.⁷⁷ These courtiers are left anonymous, but they are presumed to be omnipresent and influential entities at the court. Although their official roles are not defined, they are depicted as close to the king, enjoying access to him and having his ear even when he is ill. They advise him and are privy to his plans. In the context of a monarchical system, they form part of the inner court.⁷⁸ They owe their status and influence to the king, but although they depend on him, he is not the only one to whom they relate. They eventually succeed in rousing Aristobulus against Antigonus, but to ensure that their plan works, they conspire with the queen. In fact, the conniving courtiers and the queen rely on each other in their plan to eliminate Antigonus. The identity of the courtiers remains elusive, but it becomes clear that they are not a homogeneous group. As mentioned above, we can assume that a certain faction supported Aristobulus’s mother, even though they were overpowered by him and his followers. Similarly, it is likely that only one faction acted against Antigonus. The power struggles within the dynasty were thus mirrored and amplified by the various pressure groups at the court. However, none of the courtiers are described as attempting to seize the diadem for themselves. They remain loyal, and their enmity is directed only against Antigonus, not the present king. Yet, while they are staunch supporters of the Hasmonean dynasty in general, they take it upon themselves to choose a dynastic candidate.⁷⁹

One of the vignettes that Josephus includes in the narrative adds another layer to this snapshot of Hasmonean court society. As seen above, a servant (παῖς)⁸⁰ tasked with disposing of the king’s vomited blood spills it onto the spot where Antigonus has just been killed, still indicated by bloodstains. Josephus claims that the mishap was caused by divine providence,⁸¹ but in the story, the servant is immediately accused of having done this on purpose as an act of protest against the fratricide. When Aristobulus enquires about what caused the clamor and eventually learns about the incident, the king expresses his final remorse.⁸² The drama in this episode displays opposing factions at the court, but it unfolds on a social level different from that of the courtiers. It also adds another voice to the conflict. Whereas the core of Josephus’s story purports Aristobulus’s innocence, the servant is suspected of protesting against the king, blaming him, not the conspirators, for Antigonus’s death by literally mixing the king’s blood with that of his brother.⁸³ Josephus’s narrative thus interweaves contradictory traditions and preserves part of the multivocality of accounts and explanations that must have blossomed in the aftermath of the events. Many of these will have been based on hearsay and rumors, especially since the palace will have been off-limits to the majority of the population. The stories thus

⁷⁷ In Josephus, *BJ* 1.72, the conspirators are described as οἱ πονηροὶ [...] κατὰ τὸ βασιλείου.

⁷⁸ Josephus, *BJ* 1.72–74; *AJ* 13.308–310. Cf. the overall discussion of the court structure in Hellenistic Empires, including an overview of some of the main concepts and previous scholarship, in Strootman 2014, esp. 31–41, 111–135.

⁷⁹ Josephus, *BJ* 1.72, 74, 85; *AJ* 13.303, 320.

⁸⁰ Josephus, *BJ* 1.82–83; *AJ* 13.314–315. The term παῖς indicates that this was presumably an enslaved servant.

⁸¹ Josephus, *BJ* 1.82; *AJ* 13.314.

⁸² Josephus, *BJ* 1.83–84; *AJ* 13.316–318.

⁸³ Josephus, *BJ* 1.82; *AJ* 13.314–315.

purport inside knowledge, but they, in fact, reflect contemporary political imaginaries. As narratives that were presumably retold numerous times, they were used to make sense of recent events. Yet while they report extraordinary events, their core conformed with recent experiences and perceptions of the court. The vignette about the servant is anecdotal, but it reveals the factionalism and atmosphere of heightened tension and mistrust that reached every corner of the palace. Together with the rest of the Antigonus narrative, it also highlights the significance of the court in the Hasmonean system.

The Hasmonean organization of power under Aristobulus

If we read Josephus's reports on Aristobulus's reign with a focus not on the sequence of events but on the structures it projects, the passages reflect an advanced monarchical system. In this system, power was organized around the ruler and his authority, and it was expressed through pomp, splendor, and the conspicuous signaling of supremacy. The ruler's position was based on a strictly dynastic concept that effectively limited the pool of contenders for the highest power. However, the dynasty not only guaranteed future successions, but prominent Hasmoneans also assumed significant roles in the administration and developed a status of their own. The court functioned as a distinct physical and social space, set apart from Jerusalem as a city, the population, and presumably the rest of the country. In this court society, factions and pressure groups competed for influence generated and articulated through their proximity to the ruler. None of these elements—the preponderance of the dynasty, the elaborate (quasi-)royal representation, the influence and prominence of the queen, and the predominance of the court—are surprising in the context of Hellenistic monarchical systems. In the case of Hasmonean Judea, however, they become apparent in this compact form for the first time in Josephus's accounts of Aristobulus's reign.

This is not to say that these elements of the Hasmonean power structure were put into place by Aristobulus. In all likelihood, most of them were established or emerged during the long tenure of John Hyrcanus. Yet, it is in Josephus's report on Aristobulus, and especially in the Antigonus story, that these elements are made more explicit than in any of the previous passages in the *Bellum* or the *Antiquitates*. Aristobulus furthered the structural changes by adopting the royal title, with consequences not only for his own status. His wife became *basilissa*, and as shown above, Antigonus's elevated position should also be interpreted in this context. Although the story of Antigonus's death is one of disruption and instability, the background against which it unfolds thus projects a system that was firmly in place. The challenges to its stability arose from the inside, and even though they caused significant trouble, they did not question the power structure as such. For the contemporaries, the period between the death of John Hyrcanus and the accession of Alexander Jannaeus must have felt tumultuous and unstable. From a structural perspective, however, Hasmonean Judea at the end of the second century BCE was not a failing system in crisis but a highly functional one, interrupted by dynastic infighting. These rivalries were inextricably linked to the power structure and put it under stress; paradoxically, however, they also reflect the stability of the dynastic system.

Conclusions: Reassessing Josephus's Aristobulus narrative

The reign of Judah Aristobulus I and the respective accounts in the works of Flavius Josephus do not figure largely in most discussions of Hasmonean history. This is hardly a surprise, considering that Aristobulus ruled for less than a year and Josephus's accounts are dominated by the story of Antigonus, which reads like a generic court intrigue and follows a rather implausible plot. However, the close analysis offered in this chapter has shown the importance of Aristobulus's rule both in Hasmonean history and in Josephus's presentation.

In his historical works, Josephus dedicates disproportionate attention to Aristobulus, and especially to the story of Antigonus's downfall and its aftermath. Josephus had a multiplicity of sources at his disposal, but he carefully calibrated the material, putting deliberate emphasis on the story of Antigonus while suppressing and condensing other aspects. In Josephus's view, the year 104/103 BCE was a time of crisis, but it was not the nadir of Hasmonean rule. Instead, he frames Aristobulus's reign as an inflection point in that it adumbrates problems that would only worsen in the following decades. The adoption of kingship as a deviation from the ideal of high-priestly rule, the growing influence of dynastic women (considered an abomination by Josephus), Hasmonean infighting, and internal violence all emerge again in what follows, with increasing severity.⁸⁴ Josephus does not yet expose them as symptoms indicating the general demise of Hasmonean rule, but as the narrative progresses, his audience will remember their initial appearances during Aristobulus's reign. Thus, it is only in hindsight that the story reveals its complexities and significance. Read in this light, however, Aristobulus's reign provides a crucial perspective for the rest of Hasmonean history, serving as a warning and a signpost for the problems that would ultimately lead to the loss of Judean independence.

In Josephus's careful modulation, Aristobulus's reign is presented as a time of crisis, but its challenges pale in comparison to what follows. However, the historical analysis above has shown that the problems in 104/103 BCE were, in fact, far more severe than Josephus admits. Over the course of less than one year, five leading members of the dynasty died, including three who were killed (or said to have been murdered) by their relatives. Josephus intentionally condenses his report and brushes over the violent coup at the beginning of Aristobulus's reign and Alexander Jannaeus's execution of one of his remaining brothers. Furthermore, the story of Antigonus is told not as an instance of intradynastic strife but as a tragedy of two loving brothers who are misled by malevolent conspirators. While it is impossible to reconstruct the events of 104/103 BCE in close detail, the historical situation still appears much more tumultuous than a superficial reading of Josephus's presentation suggests.

This turmoil was the result of the Hasmonean dynastic system, as it emerged during the reign of John Hyrcanus and was further solidified by Aristobulus. However, as the final part of the discussion has shown, a structural analysis reveals yet another perspective. By focusing not on the plot of the Antigonus story but on what is assumed and taken for granted, we derive a better understanding of the political structure and its institutions. At the end of the second century BCE, power in Hasmonean Judea was stringently

⁸⁴ Cf., for instance, Josephus, *BJ* 1.19, 111–112, 117–122, 160, 171–172; *AJ* 13.432; 14.77, 490–491.

organized and resided unequivocally with the dynasty. Aristobulus's adoption of kingship furthered existing patterns, but it also strengthened the dynastic system as a whole. The hierarchy was signaled and confirmed through public appearances, symbolic tokens, and ostentatious self-presentation. While the ruling Hasmonean sat at the top of the hierarchy, dynastic power and influence extended far beyond him as an individual. Salina Alexandra was thus the first Hasmonean queen, and Antigonus demonstrated the potential for relatives belonging to the "second tier." The increasing power struggles among members of the dynasty present the flipside of these dynamics. In a system in which power was strictly limited to the family, the rivalry among potential candidates intensified. The Aristobulus narrative also marks the first instance in the *Bellum* and the *Antiquitates* in which the court is presented as a quasi-institution. The Antigonus story leaves the courtiers undefined, but they are depicted as being close to the king, engaging with members of the dynasty, and intervening in political decisions, even through intrigue, if they deemed it necessary.

As one of the most detailed episodes in Josephus's Hasmonean accounts up to this point, the passage thus provides more insights into the Judean power structure than is commonly assumed and reveals its complexities. In turn, the Antigonus story appears less novelistic if we reinsert it into the matrix of Hasmonean power. It reflects a system that is both stable and generates internal tension, that is functioning effectively, but also easily brought out of balance. These dynamics caution against easy explanations or a simplistic narrative of the rise and fall of the Hasmonean dynasty. They also help explain why and how Hasmonean power lasted for another two generations.

ABBREVIATIONS

BNJ – Brill's Neue Jacoby.

GLAJJ – M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 1–3, Jerusalem 1976–1984.

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