

Jews in Republican Rome: The literary sources



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Dates:

Received: 13 Feb. 2023

Accepted: 10 Aug. 2023

Published: 29 Nov. 2023

How to cite this article:

Steenkamp, J., 2023, 'Jews in Republican Rome: The literary sources', *In die Skriflig* 57(1), a2943. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2943>

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There is considerable literary evidence that gives us some insight into the Jewish culture in the city of Rome from different perspectives after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Yet, there are few primary accounts of Jews in the city of Rome during the 1st century BCE. In this article it is argued that there was already a significant Jewish population in Rome during the middle of the 1st century BCE and it already had a noted influence on daily life in the capital city. In the wake of the Roman Republic's imperialistic successes, the city saw an influx of foreign peoples and cultures, including Jews, and they were mentioned in the literature of the time. The little that was written about Jews during this time pertain to those aspects of their culture and religion that appeared peculiar to the Romans, especially in the so-called higher genres of philosophical treatises or history. Yet, we also have texts describing everyday life in Republican Rome – lyric and elegiac poetry. These, too, feature references to Jewish culture. Although Roman poetry is never explicitly interested in Jews or Jewish people, it did paint a picture of Rome at street-level, so to speak, through the eyes of a literate citizen and this picture sometimes included Jews. In this article this type of evidence available to us will be reconsidered to fill in the gap in our historical knowledge.

Contribution: This article presents an interpretation of Jews and Jewish practices mentioned during the 1st century BCE in Roman poetry. The poetry of Tibullus, Horace and Ovid, written from a Roman perspective, have been contextualised in their literary traditions and informed by the established philosophical opinions of the time from Cicero, Varro and Lucretius. The result is a useful discussion of how extensive and how reliable these sources are for the understanding of Jewish culture in Rome during the 1st century BCE.

Keywords: Ovid; Horace; Cicero; Jewish history; Republican Rome; Latin poetry; Tibullus;

Introduction

In this article the primary sources will be investigated for our understanding of the daily life of Jews in the city of Rome in the last century BCE. Histories of Jews in the ancient world tend to focus, rightly, on events in Alexandria and Palestine in the Hellenistic period and Rome under the emperors – periods and places critical to the understanding of Jewish history. Jews in Republican Rome are less well documented in extant sources. Nevertheless, this aspect of Jewish history is not unimportant and the views on Jews from non-Jewish sources are important.

This study has two interconnected aims: (1) to fill in a small gap in the historiography of Jews in Republican Rome; and (2) to try to show under what circumstances Augustan poetry can be used as historical sources. The article is an inanimate object incapable of actively addressing anything; it is the author that does the addressing. The unique challenges of Republican historiography will be addressed, including the difficulties of getting reliable demographic information, the comparative dearth of primary evidence, and the inaccessibility of Roman (and Hellenistic) categories that inform issues such as race and ethnicity. In the second part will be discussed the poetic texts themselves, how the story-worlds these poems create, compare to the world described in the historical sources, and how they compare to the descriptions in later sources.

Historical sources

We have relatively few primary document referring to Jews in the city of Rome during the 1st century BCE.¹ A greater number of references to Jews during this time did exist but these are

1. This temporal designation is deliberately vague. Some of the authors discussed, worked in the Republican and Augustan periods and some were not even born inside the political territory designated by the term *Italy*. For people living in Rome everyday life after the bloody civil wars changed very gradually and Roman imperial culture is usually considered to start after the death of Augustus in 14 CE.

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now only available as citations in the works of Josephus, Augustine and Philo of Alexandria.² Moreover, the majority of these citations are imbedded in politically charged arguments involving Jews directly and written long after the fact. If we disregard the texts quoted by Josephus, Augustine and Philo, we are left with a handful of texts from Diodorus Siculus, indirect knowledge of Varro, some more or less useful remarks from Cicero, and a contested sentence attributed to Valerius Maximus. We do, however, have no fewer than eight mentions of Jews in the texts of Horace, Tibullus and Ovid. Quantitatively, at least, this is a significant group of texts.

All the non-poetic sources that mention Jews have rhetorical agendas that pertain directly to Jews or so-called 'others' in Rome. The poetic texts, too, have rhetorical agendas, but these agendas (although not the content), as it will be argued, do not refer to Jews per se, or forward an agenda that involve Jews. The poetry is set in Rome, and Jews like many other elements in the poems, form part of a very realistic background against which the main events occur. If we trust that the art of this poetry depends to a large extent on the realism of the story-worlds in which they are set, it follows that the detail in the story-worlds is a realistic reflection of the world shared by the authors and readers. This point will be returned to later.

The second problem is that the non-poetic sources are not taking into account matters not pertaining to the state or her elite citizens – the so-called *res publica*.³ In philosophy, history or political speeches the daily life of ordinary citizens are not, generally, probed and, when they do mention Jews, they are more interested in Jewish religion, origins, myths or the geographical features of Palestine. Roman elegy and lyric, in contrast, are indeed focused on the minutiae of daily life, curious characters in the streets, and the general business of living in the city; although, one will not find in them a genuine interest in or knowledge of Jewish customs or religion.

Republican and imperial Rome

There is a great difference between the Roman Republic and what was later called the Roman Empire. Historians and New Testament scholars often refer to the Hellenistic period, a term that looks to the East, rather than to Rome herself, and they end this period at 29 BCE or 27 BCE, when Octavian became *de facto* emperor of the world under Roman control. In hindsight, the 20s BCE is a good demarcation point, because we now know this decade to be the start of the so-called *pax Romana*, that urbanisation caused great social changes in the city, and that the strong

2. The mammoth compilation of Stern (1976–1984), published in three volumes, is very useful, but also misleading. Little distinction is made between text quoted by later authors and testimonies by authors living in a contemporary context.

3. The term *res publica*, often written as one word, *respublica*, literally means 'the public thing' and is used in Republican texts to refer to: (1) public administrative affairs of the state; (2) the welfare of the state or its national interest; or (3) the body politic itself, often with reference to its constitution. The Roman Republic resembled a city-state in which citizens vied for political power. In the Roman Empire, political power was bestowed upon citizens by an emperor.

centralised authority completed huge public infrastructure projects.⁴ The Rome of the 1st century before, was very different from the one of which we read in Josephus, the New Testament or Augustine.

The difference between the Roman Republic and the Empire was fundamentally important to Jews living in the city. Under the Republic, and especially thanks to Julius Caesar, Jews lived comparatively comfortably, if the admittedly late evidence of Josephus can be believed.⁵ The situation in Alexandria after Rome took over was more or less the same – at least until 38 CE – but also changed under imperial rule.⁶ Later, under the Flavian dynasty and after the destruction of the temple, things changed in both cities. Literary work produced by Jews at these later dates, should therefore be taken with considerable discretion for at least three reasons:

- the sources are mostly embedded in documents addressing the problems of their own time – they are mostly insensitive to the historical realities of a previous age;
- these writings were produced in a Rome completely different from the 1st century BCE and, with little recourse to primary documents, the authors were probably unable (even if they were interested) to give an accurate description of the previous age;
- what we call historical documents, were not in the ancient world composed with the aim of producing a historical representation of the past at all. Our idea that history is a systematic inquiry into past events, their causes and consequences was not shared by ancient historians.⁷

Ethnicity

Reading any documentary source, including poetry, also involves another important caveat. When these texts speak about Jews, to whom exactly are they referring? Put differently: How would Romans have recognised Jews? And would they have considered Jews to constitute a separate ethnic group? Rome was filled with people of different ethnicities and different religions. Romans definitely distinguished between different groups, but it is not clear what criteria they used: whether they considered facial features or skin colour as indicator of ethnicity,⁸ or emphasised cultural habits such as dress, dietary idiosyncrasies, or religion. To compound matters, we are

4. It is important to note that the authors who wrote in this decade did not have the benefit of hindsight. After almost a century of intermittent civil war, few would predict a *pax Romana* that would last almost 100 years.

5. Ample work has been done on this issue. The text of Josephus in question is the *Antiquities*. A still recent balanced discussion of Jewish privileges in the Roman Republic can be found in Pucci Ben Zeev (1998:451–482) and Eilers (2004:86 n.1).

6. Josephus (*Ant.* 14.188) mentioned that Julius Caesar granted Jews in Alexandria citizenship (Ἀλεξανδρέων πολῖται) in 47 BCE, but it is difficult to see how he could have done this, as Alexandria was not under Roman control yet. The 'violent pogrom' (as Gruen 2004:54 has it) of 38 CE, was the reason for the petition to Emperor Caligula lead by Philo of Alexandria.

7. For the historiographical praxis of Hellenistic Jewish writers, see Steenkamp (2020:202–216; 2022:205–224).

8. McCoskey (2003:104–05) remarks that Greeks and Romans did not base identities on skin colour, but insinuates that other physiological features may have played a part (see also Derbew 2022:16–18).

also not sure how or if Jews living in Rome considered Jewishness an identity.⁹

Before we get to the Roman sources, it might be prudent to first ask to what extent the Jews considered themselves to belong to an ethnic group, or to a race, and what they considered a Jewish identity. Much has been done by Gruen (2020:131–149), most recently in *Ethnicity in the Ancient World*. Surveying the extant Hellenistic literature, he shows that Jewish identity is regularly expressed by what we would designate as ‘religion’, that is, worship, belief, practices, rituals, and adherence to tradition and law. Ancestry, genealogy, descent, or external features were not that important. Philo also does not give a definition of a Jewish ethnic identity. His use of the terms *genos* and *ethnos* does not give a consistent or precise designation of identity.¹⁰ Moreover, Jews proselytised actively by many accounts¹¹ (we will return to this later), and one would assume that the proselytised in the city herself resembled its inhabitants.

Romans were interested in the different peoples that inhabited the city. The dominant narrative that has taken root by the Augustan period – the one monumentalised in Vergil’s *Aeneid* – explains that the Roman people (*gens*) originated from a complex amalgamation of a great number of different peoples. The (commonly Greek) idea of autochthony evidently held no great attraction for the Romans.¹²

The main ‘ethnic’ groups, if one can call them that, in Rome at the end of the Republic were Italic and these included the Sabines, Etruscans and Latins, as well as a multitude of other Italic peoples, together with a large population from outside of Italy.¹³ To what extent these ethnic designations corresponded to historical roots is doubtful and there is a strong suspicion that these were not easy to distinguish by the Romans themselves.¹⁴ To what extent Romans readily recognised Jews in the street, so to speak, is difficult to answer. However, recognising Jews in religious contexts were easier and it is

9. Romans in Italy comfortably lived with multiple identities based on place of birth, language, religion and political affiliation, among others. Cicero (*De Leg.* 2.5) says as much, but see also Gruen (2020:101–103).

10. For a full list of the uses of *ethnos* and *genos* in Josephus see the chapter in Gruen. Gruen (2020:166–184) also analyses Josephus, which falls outside the scope of this paper.

11. Feldman (2006:189–190) shows that proselytism was widespread among Jews in the ancient world, and he cites Josephus (*Ap.* 2.210 and 2.282) and the New Testament (*Mt* 23:15). Judging by the evidence he cites in the rest of the chapter, it would seem that the Jews were also successful in this. The poetic sources do not mention Jewish proselytism and for this aspect of Jewish life in Rome, the historian must turn elsewhere.

12. Indeed, they openly scorned it. As Cicero sneered, Athenians and Arcadians invented stories that they had sprung from the land—as if they were field-mice crawling out of the earth (*Cic. De Rep.* 3.25, but see also Livy, 1.8.5).

13. Most prominent, probably, were Gallic or north-western European immigrants following Caesar’s conquests, but we read often about people from Spain, Africa, Egypt, Ethiopian and the Near East.

14. We know that being Etruscan or Sabine was popular among the elite and some writers would volunteer their ethnicity. Looking forward to the authors we shall discuss, we may mention that Cicero calls himself Latin (*de Leg.* 2.5), Varro a Sabine, and Propertius an Etruscan. To what extent different Italian ethnicities could be distinguished by her people is unclear. Livy (5.8), for one, confused the Faliscans and Umbrians with the Etruscans (e.g. Livy 5.8.5). Horace, from Venusia (a southern Italian town) was uncertain whether to identify himself as ‘a Lucanian or an Apulian, since the Venusian colonist ploughs his field close to both lands’ (*Satires* 2.1.34–35).

indeed in this that the documents we have from Cicero, Varro and Diodorus Siculus are more interested.

The prose sources

The political elite in Rome were mostly interested in the history and religion of the Jews and little is said about what Jews did in the streets of Rome. Although Jews are mentioned by several authors, we have reasonably complete texts of only three contemporary Latin prose authors that refer to Jews in Republican Rome: Varro, Diodorus Siculus and Cicero.

Marcus Terentius Varro was keenly interested in religions, Roman and otherwise, and wrote a great deal about them including the Jews. In contrast, Cicero, the other great polymath of the time, omitted them completely from his treatises.¹⁵ However, what we could say is that, if Varro spilling so much ink on the Jews as Augustine seemed to suggest, they must have been a known minority group in the social landscape of the Roman Republic.

Diodorus Siculus’ mammoth *Bibliotheca Historica* consisted of 40 books in Greek and was completed around 30 BCE. Jews feature only in the first book that relates the (mostly mythical) history of Diodorus’ world. He, too, was more interested in Jews only in a mythological or historical sense. He took the Jewish custom of circumcision to indicate an origin in Egypt (1.28.1–3 & 55.5) and mentioned their god – IAO – and the Lawgiver Moyses. The fragmentary books 34/35 deals with more recent history and specifically the invasion of Antiochus Epiphanes. Yet, the only remark (34/35.1.1) on Jews per se, is an off-hand remark that Jews tend to keep to themselves and regard other people as enemies.

Diodorus’ remark about the Jews following the Egyptian custom of circumcision is noteworthy. Circumcision, as external ethnic markers go, is often associated with Jews – especially in poetry – as will be discussed below. Judging by an admirably thorough examination of the primary documents (Cohen 1999:39–48), it would seem that circumcision would become a marker of Jewishness in the western parts of the Empire, although not an infallible one and one that applied only to the male half of the population. According to prose authors, circumcision was not that particular to Jews.¹⁶

Cicero is often held up as our best source on Jews in the Republican City. Cicero referred to Jews a few times, (*Pro Flacco* 28.66–69, *Ad Atticum* 2.9.1, and *De Prov. Cons.* 5.10–12), but never in any of his treatises. Generally, Cicero’s remarks on Jews are disparaging, but this need not be taken as an

15. One of the great tragedies is that Varro’s three volumes on Roman religion have not survived and virtually all of what we do know of Varro’s treatise is from quotes by Augustine. Augustine was very interested in the ‘theology’ of Varro, but how much of it can be trusted is still open for debate.

16. Most sources agree that the practice originated in Egypt. Besides Egyptians, Herodotus (2.104.2–3) named Phoenicians and the ‘Syrians of Palestine’, with which Josephus (*Ant.* 8.262) agreed, adding Ethiopians. Philo in *Questions on Genesis* (3.48) named, ‘Egyptians, Arabs, and Ethiopians and nearly all those who inhabit the southern regions near the torrid zone’ (Marcus 1953:243).

antisemitic position.¹⁷ More plausibly, Cicero was generally xenophobic as was common among members of the conservative faction of the *optimates* to which he belonged. Compare, for instance, the anti-Gallic sentiment found almost exclusively in his defence of Fonteius.

The most extensive references to Jews in Cicero are from the speech *Pro L. Flacco*, a legal argument made in defence of Lucius Valerius Flaccus, governor of Asia in 62 BCE who was accused of embezzling the annual tribute-money for the Temple in Jerusalem. Cicero's defence consisted not of denying the charges, but in showing that Flaccus acted in the interest of Rome and, although he did not send tribute money from the Jews to Jerusalem, he did not take this money for himself, but deposited it in the treasury and acted according to Roman Law. Much of the argument depended on demonstrating, at least on an emotional level, that the Jews of Asia, like all foreigners, were not wholly to be trusted.

The most revealing part of the speech lies in-between the rhetoric and the political agenda – as is indeed the case with the poetry at which we will look later. Firstly, it seems that the public gathering of Jews at political events were familiar to the audience. It follows that Jews were not only integrated in society, but were also sufficiently well-connected to hold some political sway in certain matters. Secondly, Cicero did not call Jews freedmen or former slaves (or applied to them some racial slur), even though this would have strengthened the emotional appeal of his argument.

The Cicero-text disagrees with the picture described by Philo a 100 years later. Philo (*Leg.* 155) would have us believe that these Jews were from a community of freedmen living in the Trastevere, who were taken in Jerusalem after Pompey's siege in 63 BCE. It is almost impossible to believe that these people have managed to be manumitted, form a community, and achieve such a standing in Roman society that they could agitate for political advantage so consistently that Romans like Cicero and his audience were already used to it.¹⁸

Archaeological evidence suggests that Jews settled in Rome, and indeed many cities in the Western Mediterranean very early. Of course, people migrate to cities for various reason and, besides refugees from the incursion of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (168 BCE) and the Maccabean revolt (164 BCE), many Jews migrated for economic reasons and opportunities afforded by the formal treaty with Rome in 141 BCE. By the end of the Republic, Rome was already a cosmopolitan world city that housed a great number of peoples. By the time of Cicero's *Pro Flacco*, there may have been as many

17. See the arguments in Marshall (1975:139–54).

18. The idea that Jews settled in the Trastevere at this time is contested. This may have been true in Philo's time, but there is ample evidence that they also lived in other parts of the city. The archaeological evidence usually given for this is that of catacombs and brick stamps dating from the 1st century CE (see Smallwood 1961:233–236 and especially Gruen 2004:23).

as 30000 Jews¹⁹ in a city, some guess may have housed a million.²⁰

The last prose text that must be mentioned is a quote from Valerius Maximus (1.3.2). It states that the Jews were expelled from Rome in 139 BCE. This passage is often quoted to buttress various arguments about the plight of Jews in Rome, but it is difficult to believe. Valerius Maximus was a contemporary of Philo; yet, this quote is from a 4th century compiler (Julius Paris), and there it is given without context and in the middle of a long lacuna.²¹ The quote is, however, not without historical value and to what historical events the text refers, have been described by Gruen (2004:15–19).²²

Poetic sources

Roman poetry of the 1st century BCE is set in a story-world that mostly revolves around the city herself. Sometimes it speaks about the historic city, but most often it is literally set in contemporary Rome and mentions current events, living persons and the issues of the day, while the fictional characters are cleverly interweaved into this story-world. Retrieving historical information from these poems requires the separation of the fictional foreground from the historical background.

The poetry was composed by a well-educated Roman elite for a well-educated Roman elite. This means that both parties were keenly aware of the current events and issues in the city and much of their or their patron's financial prosperity depended, in fact, on political and social conditions in the city herself. Roman poets were neither interested in the political influence Jews had – this was the world of Cicero – nor in international relations. Although these poets, as a rule, promise to write philosophy in their old age, none ever mentioned Jewish religion, although there is mention of various foreign cults. What we do get from the Roman poets are some glimpses of Jews in Rome as part of the background against which the main action of the poems play out.

Judging by the poetic texts, it would seem that the most significant effect Jews had on daily life was the regular and exasperating occurrence of the Jewish sabbath. We have several references to the Jewish sabbath as a day of ill-omen.

An interesting example is from Tibullus (1.3.15–18),²³ written 27 or 26 BCE (Murgatroyd 1980:11–12):

19. This is based on the admittedly late estimates of Josephus (*AJ* 16.162–165) who puts the number of Jewish Romans eligible for military service at 4000 – a number supported by Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.85.4).

20. Warren (2020:451) gives a short review of the primary sources at our disposal. Barclay (1996:285–293) gives a more complete account. The numbers for Augustan Rome are better studied (see Morley 2013:29–31).

21. For a discussion of the origins of the quote and the history of its interpretations, see Lane (1979:35–38).

22. Gruen maintains that the expulsion of Jews in 139 BC was one of the 'periodic expulsion decrees' that was mostly political posturing and not intended to be enforced or even be enforceable.

23. The manuscripts are not in complete agreement here. The text, taken from Murgatroyd, has been adopted by Maltby. See the critical appendix in Murgatroyd (1980:107).

*ipse ego solator, cum iam mandata dedissem,
quaerebam tardas anxius usque moras:
aut ego sum causatus aues aut omina dira
Saturniue sacram me tenuisse diem.*²⁴

[I myself, her comforter, when I have given my parting instructions, anxiously sought to delay. I made excuses in the signs of bird or unlucky omens, or that the sacred day of Saturn held me back.] (author's translation)

In the poem is reminisced about the poet's recent past as he lies very ill on the island, Corcyra, having accompanied his patron, Messalla, on an expedition to the east. The poem opens with a perfunctory address to his patron and some prayers to Death to have mercy. The next section, where the quote is from, is addressed to his girlfriend Delia in apostrophe. The speaker remembers the bad omens that accompanied his departure from Rome, and he mentions specifically the accursed day of Saturn.²⁵

The idea that the Jewish sabbath, like a Roman *dies nefas* is an inauspicious day on which to start a journey, is used again by Ovid in his *Remedia amoris*. This poem is a kind of sequel to his three-volume *Ars amatoria* to which we will turn in a moment. Ostensibly, the poem is a didactic treatise on how to cure oneself from the disease of love. The passage is from the section that suggests curing love by avoiding idleness. The general advice is followed by specific strategic devices that might be attempted: practising law, joining the army, taking up farming, hunting and fishing, and travel. The last of which, the poet warns, should not be delayed, even by inauspicious days such as the Jewish sabbath:

*nec pluvias opta, nec te peregrina morentur
sabbata nec damnis Allia nota suis*

[Do not hope for rain, or for a foreign sabbath to delay you, nor the river Allia known for its ill-luck.] (*Remedia Amoris* 219–220, [author's translation]).

Connecting the ill-omened day of the sabbath with the day commemorating the Roman defeat at the river, Allia, is significant. Where the Jewish sabbath seemed to have been an unofficial *dies nefas*, the 18th of July was a significant 'black day' on the Roman calendar.²⁶ It suggests that Jewish sabbaths were also carefully marked.²⁷

Besides being ill-omened for more superstitious Romans, the sabbath also made a real difference when trying to

24. Incidentally this, the oldest extant mention of a *dies sacer Saturni* which would later become our Saturday. Smith (1964:238) mentions that we do have a slightly earlier Greek reference to the 'day of Kronos' in Cassius Dio (49.22.4) dating back to 36 BCE.

25. For the association between the day of Saturn and the Jewish sabbath, see Maltby (2002:190), and especially Smith (1964:238–239) who discusses Cassius Dio (49.22.4) and Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.4).

26. On the 18th of July of the year variously given as 390 or 387 BCE (Rosenberger 2003:365), the Roman army suffered a devastating defeat against the Gallic forces under Brennus next to the river Allia. This defeat stuck in Roman collective memory and gave the Romans 'nightmares which lasted for centuries, long after the conquest of the Gauls themselves' (Williams 2001:221–22). For a more balanced account of the consequences of the defeat, see Rosenberger (2003:365–373); for a general discussion of its commemoration, see Kissel (2002:456–457).

27. For the marking of days on the calendar, see Horace *C.1.36. 10*, Varro, *L.L. 6.29.*, Martial 12. 35. 5–7, Catullus 107, and Pliny the Elder *Epist.* 6.11.

conduct business in the city. Horace's *Satires* 1.9 is an example in which a non-Jewish Roman use the Jewish sabbath as an excuse. The plot is complicated: The speaker, while he is walking through the central business district of Rome, is accosted and then occupied in conversation by a man. He is unable to rid himself of this irritation, but luckily a friend appears. He tries, first surreptitiously, but then overtly, to convince his friend to save him from the irksome sycophant by telling him that they have an unsettled matter to discuss. But his friend replies:

*'memini bene, sed meliore
tempore dicam; hodie tricesima sabbata: uin tu
curtis Iudaeis oppedere?' 'nulla mihi' inquam
'religio est'. 'at mi: sum paulo infirmior, unus
multorum. ignosces: alias loquar'.*

[I remember well, but I will tell you at a more convenient time. Today is the thirtieth sabbath, do you want to offend the circumcised Jew? I say, 'I have no religious scruples'. 'But I do', (he says) 'I am somewhat weaker, one of the many. Forgive me, we will talk later'.] (*Sat.* 1.9.68–72, [author's translation]).

The excuse, although it might be intended to sound slightly outlandish, is still something that would be familiar enough to the audience. The reference to Jews as circumcised (*curtis Iudaeis*) is not uncommon, but the specific kind of sabbath referenced here remains unclear.²⁸ To what extent Horace can be trusted to give accurate information about Jewish festivals is debatable and probably not too much can be read into this detail of the poem.²⁹

The Jewish sabbath also had an impact on recreational activities in Rome. Ovid mentions the sabbath in this context in the *Ars Amatoria*. This poem, in three books, is conceived as a didactic poem, like the *Remedia amoris*, but is not completely serious. The purported aim of the *Ars amatoria* is to teach young men how to become good lovers (*Ov. A.A.* 35–40). The instruction, helpfully, starts with where to find suitable girls, expounds on ways to break the ice, and also mentions ways to keep the girl happy.

Under places where suitable girls or women can be found, Ovid mentions various shaded porticos and temples in the city, but also include the *culta Iudaeo septima sacra Syro* [the festivities on the sacred seventh day of the Syrian Jew]. Interestingly, in Ovid's list many places are named – various temples and porticos – but he does not directly associate the festivities of the Jews with a temple or a building. If one could approach a girl at, say, the temple of Apollo (verse 74) or the courts (verse 79), it is implied that these Jewish festivities were hardly hidden from the public eye.

28. Gowers (2012:300) gave four explanations: '(1) the feast of the trumpets; (2) the day of atonement; (3) the feast of the tabernacles; or (4) some other Shabbath falling on the thirtieth day of the month', citing Feldman (1993:509–10 n. 103) that mentions seven solutions. The joke also works well if this reference is an invention (Brown 1993:181).

29. The humour in the poem has, of course, nothing to do with Jews. For an interesting and very thought-provoking take on the programmatic point of the poem, see Ferriss-Hill (2011:429–455).

Somewhat later, in the section on how to keep a girl happy, the sabbath again features. The poet warned the audience that some days are not good for looking for a girlfriend. He mentioned her birthday especially, because it is expensive. He suggested that erotic ventures should be started on days of ill-omen, like the Jewish sabbath, because a great number of shops are closed:

*tum licet incipias, qua flebilis Allia luce
uulneribus Latiis sanguinolenta fuit,
quaque die redeunt rebus minus apta gerendis
culta Palaestino septima festa Syro.*

[You may start [the affair] on that day of tears when the Allia flowed with the blood from Roman wounds, or when that day might return, which is less suitable for buying things, the sabbath, sacred to the Syrian Jews.] (Ov. A.A. 1.405–418, [author's translation]).³⁰

Here, again, the sabbath is bracketed in the same category as the 'black day' of 18 July associated with Roman defeat. The macabre humour depends on the audience being aware of the fact that it is harder to find open shops on the sabbath, which, in turn, suggests that Romans observing the Jewish day of rest, was a regular occurrence.

Conclusion

It would seem that Jews were hardly an uncommon sight in the streets of Rome. The number of times Jewish practices are mentioned in the poetry is significant in that they are about as frequent as Ethiopians or Gauls. The extent to which the readers are expected to understand the references in the poems, indicates that, meeting Jews in the streets or negotiating sabbaths, were experiences shared by most of the readers.

The frequent mention of the sabbath is significant. Romans in the city were slaves to the calendar – as one might expect in a city where wealth and subsistence depended on trade. The Roman calendar was a religious matter and closely related to Roman identity. If Jewish sabbaths were to be negotiated by Romans in the street, it suggests that business run by Jews were common.

Singularly lacking are specific racial slurs against Jews. Romans no doubt looked down upon foreigners in the city, be they 'ethnically' different or just 'outsiders'. However, it seems that Jews were considered a typical minority group among the large number of different ethnicities in Rome and that they hardly stood out as exotic or bizarre. Likewise, the peculiarities of Jewish religious practices may have raised eyebrows, but among the worshippers of a plethora of different cults, both Italic and foreign, the private religious culture of Jews did not elicit great surprise in the extant texts.

In further investigations, these poems may be profitably compared with those of Martial under the Flavian emperors. Martial's poetry is also often 'on street level' and also contains

³⁰The reference to Jews here is clear in light of the earlier *cultaque Iudaeo septima sacra Syro* quoted above (Stern 1976–1984:1.349). For a nuanced discussion of the use of *palaestinus* see Feldman (1990:13–14).

many references to Jews.³¹ However, written after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem, the attitude to Jews differs markedly. Moreover, in Martial's period we also have eyewitness testimonies from a Jewish source in Josephus to which the poetry can be compared.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

J.S. declared sole authorship of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human participants.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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