

Presenter: Benjamin Isaac, Tel Aviv University

Title: **“Jews and the urban crowds: Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, Rome”**

Panel: Ancient History

The nature of antisemitism in antiquity, hatred of the Jews, fear of the Jews – several terms are used – has been discussed in several works of scholarship. These focus on the explicit pronouncements we have in ancient texts, namely the writings of Greek and Latin authors. These represent the opinions of an intellectual upper class, crucially important, of course, but inevitably representing only a small segment of ancient society.

This paper will attempt to focus on a different aspect of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in antiquity, namely the tensions between large population groups in major ancient cities and the role played by the Roman imperial authorities in this sphere.

Substantial numbers of Jews lived in the cities of Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch in Syria, Caesarea-on-the-Sea in Palestine, and of course in Rome. To this may be added the densely populated region around the smaller town of Jamnia (Yavne) in Palestine. It will be clear, then, that apart from Rome, all these centres belonged to the Eastern Mediterranean region.

We have no information on truly large numbers of Jews in urban centres in the West.

We are faced with reports of conflicts, political, social, religious and economic, which entailed long-term tensions and occasional outbursts of extreme violence. All this took place in the period when the Roman Empire encompassed numerous provinces that formed, to some extent, an integrated whole. The Roman authorities left much to local leadership, but the ultimate responsibility for peace and order remained a matter for the Emperor and his representatives and was therefore entrusted to the provincial authorities and the military at the highest level.

The present paper will trace such events and focus in particular on the attitudes of the Roman authorities on each occasion. Obviously, major pre-modern cities with their immense poverty, lack of adequate provisions and services, exacerbated by the absence of a professional police apparatus, always have seen social tension. The events recorded in our sources lead to one obvious conclusion, so it will be argued: the explosions of violence that occurred were not normally the result of a loss of control on the part of the imperial

authorities, but of conscious incitement or willful negligence for political reasons.

Incompetence was rarely the reason.

If this conclusion is right, it has significant consequences. It means that for the phenomenon under review a similar process can be observed that can be seen in so many other periods and regions: large-scale hostilities between sections of the population tend to be immediately connected with attitudes and acts of the authorities, whether ideologically charged or politically manipulated.