

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenneth Atkinson. *Queen Salome: Jerusalem's Warrior Monarch of the First Century B.C.E.* Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2012. 296 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7002-0.



Reviewed by Karl C. Randall

Published on H-War (February, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Queen Salome is an interesting but long-overlooked figure in ancient history. Kenneth Atkinson has finally redressed this oversight in his work *Queen Salome*. Atkinson has taken great pains to gather every source of information on Salome Alexandra, making it the only comprehensive work about her life. The author's evaluation and collation of sources relating the same event are both careful and clear. Some materials, such as Josephus, are stripped of their bias while others, such as sections of the *Gemara*, which are often discounted as non-contemporary, have been included—but only after proving that they are either clearly based on or match earlier works. In short, Atkinson has done a masterful job of gathering and vetting his source material.

Given the topic of the book and the fact that a number of the primary sources take a strongly patriarchal slant, it is only natural that *Queen Salome* includes a fair amount of information regarding the life and lot of females during the first century BCE and female rulers in particular to provide contextual balance not shown in source material. Atkinson skillfully teases out the truth hidden behind the almost complete purge of Queen Salome's accomplishments that has occurred with the passage of time. At times, however, Atkinson pushes the issue somewhat harder than necessary and his tone occasionally takes on

a decidedly feminist slant.

The sum total of information directly mentioning or alluding to Queen Salome, however, remains woefully small, a fact that will remain unchanged unless new sources come to light. To compensate for such a narrow array of sources, Atkinson wisely chose to expand his focus to include Queen Salome's immediate family, ancestors and descendants, and other female rulers of her time. While this expansion is well done and natural given the dearth of source material, the finished work is somewhat less of a biography of a single person than a history of Hasmonean-ruled Judea. That being said, Atkinson's work remains the first and only unified work on Queen Salome and as such it is worthy of praise.

The book provides sufficient amount of background information on early Jewish beliefs that adds a layer of depth and understanding to not only the Jewish religion and its early beliefs, but also to how those beliefs affected the relationship of first-century Judea with foreign influences and foreign nationals and others in the region. The inclusion of this background information is vital to anyone not conversant with Jewish customs and traditions of the period, making it a boon to both laymen and professional historians not specialized in biblical or Judean

studies.

Queen Salome does have its flaws though. Atkinson's prose occasionally becomes slightly repetitive, and transitions are choppy early on—most particularly in the preface. This flaw largely subsides as the work progresses, as the author becomes more comfortable with his task. The book also contains upward of a dozen typographical errors. While none of the errors are critical, the combination of these two problems gives the impression that *Queen Salome* could have benefited from a slightly more stringent editorial process prior to release.

It is my sincere hope that the lack of polish does not deter prospective readers, for Atkinson has managed to create a volume that is both comprehensive and original in focus, a rare accomplishment indeed. For anyone wishing to learn more about Queen Salome's remarkable life and accomplishments, Atkinson's volume is the first and only source on the subject. Of interest for anyone in gender studies, or classical or biblical history, it manages to be of use to both the layman and the serious scholar alike.

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Citation: Karl C. Randall. Review of Atkinson, Kenneth, *Queen Salome: Jerusalem's Warrior Monarch of the First Century B.C.E.*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

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