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The Princeps and the Queen: The Arrival of Julia Berenice in Rome

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Oral Presentation O4.2

THE PRINCEPS AND THE QUEEN: THE ARRIVAL OF JULIA BERENICE IN ROME

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The Jewish queen Julia Berenice began an affair with the future Roman emperor Titus in the summer of AD 67. She was important to the formation of the Flavian dynasty not just as Titus' mistress, but as a powerful political ally and financial backer. However, after Vespasian, Titus' father, emerged as the ultimate victor of the civil war of 69, Berenice did not join her lover Titus in Rome when he returned to the city in 71. Instead, she did not arrive at Rome until the year 75. The ancient sources tell us that "Berenice was at the very height of her power" [and] dwelt in the palace, cohabitating with Titus. She expected to marry him and was already behaving in every respect as if she were his wife.

This paper will determine why it was necessary for Berenice to wait until 75 to join her lover Titus in Rome, and how, four years after she last saw Titus, she could be "at the very height of her power." It contends that until this time, the Flavian regime was not secure enough to permit Berenice's arrival, and the inevitable backlash from those who viewed Titus and Berenice as a new Antony and Cleopatra.

The regime faced serious opposition from the senator and philosopher Helvidius Priscus. He openly challenged Vespasian, and in particular, the succession of Titus. Titus' extravagant lifestyle and his relationship with Berenice provided ample ammunition for Helvidius, assertions that the best man should be emperor, and Titus was clearly not "the best man." Vespasian tolerated this criticism for a time, however, Helvidius was finally exiled and then put to death, certainly before 75, when Berenice arrived. The sources do not directly state it, but there is substantial evidence to suggest that Titus was the one responsible for the execution of Helvidius Priscus.

When the Senate did not respond with hostility to Helvidius' execution, Titus must have felt that the Flavian regime was secure enough to ask for permission to bring Berenice to Rome. Vespasian allowed it, and the queen joined her lover in the Imperial Palace.