INTRODUCTION

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Josephus, cultural critic and chronicler of the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-73/4 CE), is one of the most polemical and compelling writers of the Roman Empire. He writes in Greek, as a Jewish leader of a revolt against Rome, who came over to the Romans. His extraordinary prose combines an extended self-justification, an explanation of Jewish culture to the Romans, through the medium of a culturally privileged Greek, and the riveting story of a failed rebellion against the dominant Empire of the Mediterranean, written now as an awkward insider of the corridors of power, recalling his own opposition to that power. Josephus, that is, writes on and through the boundaries of culture; if all history is written by victors, he writes as a defeated leader now with the triumphant new emperor: he crosses the boundary between victor and victim, insider and outsider. For the scholar interested in post-colonial writing, in cultural identity, in the rhetoric of self-fashioning, Josephus is a remarkable gift. What is more, the history he tells has powerful resonances today in the Middle East: it is he who gives us the authoritative account of Masada, the rocky desert fortress destroyed by the Romans and now a central icon of the state of Israel. The destruction of the Temple is a founding moment in the Jewish imagination, still rehearsed in ritual and political rhetoric. What more could one want from an ancient source? In 2003, Mary Beard invited us to imagine the euphoric reception classicists would give his work were it to be newly discovered today:

This is the kind of text that ancient historians and literary critics would die for. It is the kind of text that makes the study of Greco-Roman antiquity so much richer than that of almost any other ancient society. The kind of text we just can’t get enough of.

The joke is, of course, that the works of Josephus have been known to us for centuries, but far from being eagerly devoured by classical scholars, they have all but been excluded from the classical canon, especially the canon of literature. For the classical mainstream, despite the efforts of a handful of determined classical historians, who have produced distinguished work on Josephus the historian, Josephus has never been a Thucydides or a Plutarch or even a Philo. For classicists in general, Josephus has been left largely and, it seems, with relief to the care of theologians and religious historians. Few literary critics have, as Beard puts it, died for Josephus. A conspiracy of factors has caused this neglect, especially in the English-speaking world. Rigorously policed disciplinary boundaries have meant that classicists have felt poorly trained to comment upon, for example, the Jewish Realien in Josephus; the history of the region has been treated as a minor boundary squabble, despite its importance to
the self-presentation of the Flavian dynasty; modern scholars have reacted against Victorian religious use of Josephus to support naïve biblical archaeology or the difficult politics of restorationism (the Christian desire to return the Jews to Palestine to hasten the Second Coming). The literature of the so-called Second Sophistic has often been down-graded as non-classical, secondary and second rate: Josephus has often been treated as the second string of even this second string. This dismissiveness can have surprisingly racist overtones, as exemplified by a recent review of the book Being Greek Under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire, which questioned the inclusion of Jewish writing in such a volume, as if there was no connection between Philo, Josephus and the Talmud, or between those texts and the dominant Greco-Roman culture.\(^2\)

But the tide is turning fast: since Beard’s article, which was one of two on Josephus in the volume Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text, edited by A.J. Boyle and W.J. Dominik, there have been two important collections of essays published which also focus on Josephus’ Flavian contexts: historical, cultural and literary (Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome, edited by Jonathan Edmondson, Steven Mason and James Rives, and Josephus and Jewish History in Flavian Rome and Beyond, edited by Joseph Sievers and Gaia Lembi, both in 2005). Martin Goodman’s Rome and Jerusalem and Seth Schwartz’s Imperialism and Jewish Society 200 BCE to 640 CE have explored the clash of cultures between Rome and the Jews in a sophisticated manner. It can’t yet be said that we just can’t get enough of Josephus, but he’s certainly becoming something like a hot property.

He wrote four extant works. The first is the Bellum Judaicum (Jewish War), his account of the Jewish revolt against Rome, a war in which the young Yosef ben Matitiyahu (as he was then known) had himself fought, first on the side of Judaean insurgents against the Roman oppressors, and then, in a spectacular act of self-serving treachery or true enlightenment, depending on your point of view, he surrendered to Vespasian in 67 CE and went on to fight for the Romans, serving Titus in the final phase of the conflict and sharing in his victory in 71 CE. Josephus would claim in retrospect that he had a divine mission to proclaim the future greatness of the Flavians (BJ 3.340-408), and his (consequent) arguments for not complying with the suicide pact he made with his colleagues are a masterpiece of the rhetoric of self-justification in the name of a higher power, which have profoundly disturbed critics over the centuries. He now became Titus Flavius Josephus, Roman citizen, and settled comfortably in Rome (living in Vespasian’s former private dwellings), where he pursued his writing. The Bellum Judaicum in all probability was largely finished by the late 70s CE (although there are debates about the precise dating of all of his works). He then wrote his Antiquitates Judaicae (Jewish Antiquities), a detailed account of the origins, laws and customs of the Jews. This work inevitably recalls Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ Roman Antiquities as well as Plutarch’s Greek and Roman Questions: that is, it falls into a particular tradition of ancient ethnogra-
phy/history—an attempt to catalogue, explain and project an image of one culture to another. Josephus’ Antiquitates Judaicae re-tells Jewish history from the Bible forward, as well as discussing cultic activity and ritual. Josephus was a cohen, a hereditary priest, and tells us he had studied widely in Jewish cults as well as ancient philosophy. As such, the Antiquitates Judaicae provides remarkable testimony of a knowledgeable cultural guide giving—from his own particular perspective—an account of his religious and cultural life to an audience from elsewhere. This is the performance of an intellectual who is straddling cultures. He also wrote a brief autobiography, which offers another perspective on his rhetoric of self-presentation, and finally Against Apion, a polemical defence of Judaism against prejudicial accounts of the religion, especially that of the Greek writer Apion. These are the performances of an intellectual who is not just straddling cultures, but who is fighting for his place in a religious and social market-place of prejudice and aggression. Again, as an example of the divisive and competitive world of Empire cultural politics, these are texts of rare value.

The aim of this volume is to read Josephus, and to read Josephus as literature. Josephus is by no means an easy read. The sheer bulk of the Bellum Judaicum and Jewish Antiquities are daunting. Josephus may have viewed the length of the AJ as a cause for boasting (twenty volumes and no fewer than 60,000 lines of text! AJ 20.267), but not every reader is likely to find this a boon. Moreover, Josephus is difficult to make sense of for precisely the same reasons as he is now proving so attractive: the complex cultural identities, agendas and traditions of both works and their author. It is unsurprising that different ages read very differently according to the preoccupations and prejudices of the time. It is fascinating, for example, that between 1801 and 1901 over 200 separate editions of Whiston’s translation of Josephus were published; but over the same period only 46 scholarly articles were published in English (of which 27 were on limited religious questions and 10 on archaeological matters). Josephus was read, it seems, in as much as he was, by those with an interest in the Holy Land, but was not treated as a subject for scholarship (in those great days of Altertumswissenschaft). The current Zeitgeist is attuned to ‘Greek Knowledge, Roman Power’, ‘Greek Literature and the Roman Empire’, ‘Becoming Roman, Staying Greek’, ‘Being Greek Under Rome’ et cetera, but, in self-consciously and challengingly asserting the importance of Jewish identity and Jewish traditions in (Hellenised) Rome, Josephus exposes just how complicated a business were cultural allegiances and traditions in the early Roman Empire. In colonial studies influenced by Edward Said, we are constantly encouraged to think of power in terms of polarisation: the coloniser and colonised, the master and subaltern. Josephus, with his Greek, Jewish and Roman cultural matrices, and shifting polemical self-presentations, shows how insufficient polarisation is to these dynamics of writing (cultural) power.

The Bellum Judaicum was, he tells us, originally written in his native language (most likely Aramaic) for Jewish and non-Jewish readers beyond the
Roman Empire, and subsequently translated (or adapted) into Greek so that ‘Greeks and Romans not involved in the campaigns should not remain ignorant of these events, relying on flattering or fictitious accounts’ (BJ 1.6). Elsewhere he relates that mastering the Greek language has been a struggle (AJ 20.263) and that the Bellum Judaicum was written with the help of ‘assistants for the Greek idiom’ (Ap. 1.50). It is hard to know how far to believe Josephus’ confessions of inadequacy here, as such claims were a common rhetorical ploy. But his choice to write in Greek is an essential aspect of his work and to how we read it. Reading any work as literature necessarily involves reading it as something literature (Greek literature, Latin literature, Jewish literature, etc.), and the implicit assumptions that come with a literary tradition. Josephus is deliberate about the positioning of his work within three mighty cultural traditions. In calling the Jewish Antiquities an ‘archaeology’ of the Jews, he flags Jewish identity at the same time as he inscribes his work into Greek and Roman literary heritage by alluding both to Thucydides’ ‘archaeology’ of the Sicilians at the beginning of Book 6 of his History of the Peloponnesian War and to Dionysius’ Roman Antiquities. Amidst the many masks of Josephus, his (self-) placement within the genres of Greek writing provides an essential strategy of self-presentation.

All the essays in this special issue are concerned with cultural identity and with showing that how we read Josephus to a great extent depends from which literary and cultural perspective(s) we read it. Jonathan Price argues against the common image of Josephus as a coward and a traitor by reading the crucial speech against suicide in book 3 of the Jewish War through and against the Greek historiographical tradition headed by Thucydides. Myles Lavan examines Titus’ speech to the Jews in book 6 of the same work and discusses the divergent readings generated by Greek and Jewish frames. Sparta is the focus of Jonathan Barclay’s article, looked at within the triangulation of Jewish, Greek and Roman traditions. Analysing the representations of Sparta in Against Apion in relation to those in Plutarch’s Lycurgus, Barclay argues that Josephus draws on recognisable tropes of the legendarily tough Spartans in order to fashion the Jews as even tougher. In her fresh look at the Esther narrative in the Jewish Antiquities, Emily Kneebone argues that it has much to tell us about identity in Diaspora society, not least that there is no stable ‘Jewish’ identity. Tim Whitmarsh also examines a tale in the Jewish Antiquities, that of Joseph, Josephus’ namesake. He examines how Josephus challenges Greek claims to cultural originality, to be the earliest (and best), and also discusses further the politics of reading a work ‘as literature’.

The essays are also united in their foregrounding of what we might call the literary elements of Josephus’ writing: style, rhetoric, image and metaphor. Price and Lavan are both concerned with the rhetorical construction of key speeches, Price with irony and the failure of rhetoric, Lavan with the rhetoric of mastery and slavery. Barclay discusses Josephus’ use of spectacle, and Whitmarsh illuminates his construction of narrative temporality. Whitmarsh and
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Kneebone are both concerned with narratives that are sometimes considered 'novelistic' and that have been located within the genre of the Greek romance (a fluid and contested category, to be sure). Their articles go beyond close reading of Josephus to invite renewed reflection upon the genre of the Greek novel.

This volume has grown out of a three-day seminar held in 2006 at the Classics Faculty at the University of Cambridge, organised by Simon Goldhill and Helen Morales with the assistance of Nick Dodd. It was financed by the Craven Fund of the Classics Faculty, to whom thanks are here offered. Gathering Josephus experts together with literary critics, some of whom were largely ignorant of the author, made for an interesting chemistry and we would like to thank in particular Nick Dodd, Franco Basso, Nicholas Wiater, Honora Chapman, Daniel and Hadassah Boyarin, Tony Boyle, Michael Reeve, John Henderson, and Richard Hunter (as well as the readers for the journal) for their contributions and discussions. We had been invited to run a conference for those who work on literature in the Classics Faculty. When we first suggested to our colleagues that the texts we wanted to read for the conference were the works of Josephus, one honest if unenthusiastic response was, 'But it is literature?' This volume will at the very least, we hope, explore the problems and pleasures involved in answering that question.

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NOTES


2. Jane Lightfoot, 'No Romans Here', Times Literary Supplement April 19 2002. Lightfoot's complaint is actually about Seth Schwartz's chapter on rabbinic literature. She writes: 'What is a piece on “being Jewish in a Greco-Roman city” really doing in a collection on “being Greek under Rome”?' To think this is not to think hard enough about patterns of assimilation to dominant culture. Moreover, both Josephus and Philo were also the subject of chapters in the volume; it is not clear whether Lightfoot is also critical of their inclusion on the same grounds, or whether she considers rabbinic literature more Jewish in some way than the works of Josephus and Philo (if so, this is doubly prejudicial).