

The Tradition of *Amplificatio* in Josephus's *Against Apion*
1.1-9

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The Jewish historian Josephus comes to write *Against Apion*, his final work, at the conclusion of the first century.¹ At the pinnacle of his career as a historian, he has honed his hand at writing history in the tradition of the Greeks through his record of the Jewish uprising in his *Jewish War* and then his reckoning of the entirety of Jewish history in his *Jewish Antiquities*.² *Against Apion* is markedly different, though, because it is not a history of an event or a people, but rather a critical analysis of anti-Jewish histories in circulation at the time and a self-presentation of the Jewish people to a Greek-speaking Roman audience well acquainted with the discipline Herodotus fathered. As an outsider, Josephus comes to the historiographical tradition fully aware of its tropes and expectations. One such convention is *amplificatio*, the magnification of events, deeds, and persons, which features prominently in *Against Apion*. Through a careful study of his magnifications (as well as a look into how exactly *amplificatio* traditionally works), we see that Josephus is able to use Greek historiography to critique Greek historiography. The genius of Josephus is that by weaving together something that is neither a Hellenized Jewish take on history nor a Judaized Greek one, he is reinventing the tradition through adherence to its expectations, as the Greeks believed all historians are expected to do.

The Latin term *amplificatio*³ (“widening”) and its Greek equivalent αὐξησις (“growth”) are central to the Greek and Roman historiographical tradition. *Amplificatio* does not simply mean that historians in their work attempt to convince their readers that what they are writing is important and of interest. Every piece of argumentative writing attempts to do so, but not all argumentative writing is *amplificatio*. Rather, this term refers to the fact that historians magnify their subject material since persuading the audience of the history’s greatness and importance lends the historian authority. In the historiographical tradition dating back to Herodotus and Thucydides, *amplificatio* specifically demands that each historian present his subject matter as in some manner

qualitatively much greater or more crucial than what his predecessor historians have recorded. An exhaustive investigation of the development of *amplificatio* is far beyond the scope of this work, but a tracing of the tradition through several vignettes from Herodotus and Thucydides, the foundational authors of Greek historiography, will provide the background necessary for exploring how Josephus, an outsider to Greek history who is joining and adapting a tradition several centuries in the making, employs *amplificatio* in the first lines of *Against Apion*.

Herodotus begins the tradition of *amplificatio* at the opening of his *Histories* with his implicit attack on the Homeric tradition. In the first sentence of the work he announces his plan to record the great deeds of the Greek and non-Greek worlds and also the reason for the hostilities between them (Hdt. 1.1.0), specifically the recent Persian War. Assuming that the Trojan War will immediately come to mind in his readers, Herodotus very briefly treats the series of kidnappings, culminating in that of Helen, claimed to be responsible for the Trojan War (1.1.1-1.5.3). Since in his research, however, Herodotus has discovered that the Persian and Phoenician accounts disagree on how the kidnappings played out, he stops his discussion of the Trojan War immediately and begins the history of Greek and non-Greek animosity with Croesus and the history of Lydia (1.6.1) because he decides to start his *Histories* with undisputed events. The historiographical choice leads him to pass over the Trojan War, *the* history that occupied his authorial predecessors. This choice serves in turn to amplify the unprecedented level of warfare in the Persian Wars by diminishing the significance of the Trojan War as judged by the lack of accuracy and disagreement on its events. In short, he implicitly demands that a greater portion of fame, the all-important κλέος, be given to his *Histories* than has been given to the *Iliad*.⁴

In Book 7 Herodotus offers a more explicit example of *amplificatio* in his analysis of Xerxes' invasion, in which he states in grand terms that the army he is writing about is the largest ever known:⁵

στόλων γὰρ τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν πολλῶ δὴ μέγιστος οὗτος ἐγένετο, ὥστε μήτε τὸν Δαρείου τὸν ἐπὶ Σκύθας παρὰ τοῦτον μηδένα φαίνεσθαι, μήτε τὸν Σκυθικόν, ὅτε Σκύθαι Κιμμερίου

διόκοντες ἐς τὴν Μηδικὴν χώραν ἐσβαλόντες σχεδὸν πάντα τὰ ἄνω τῆς Ἀσίας καταστρεψάμενοι ἐνέμοντο, τῶν εἵνεκεν ὕστερον Δαρεῖος ἐτιμωρέετο, μήτε κατὰ τὰ λεγόμενα τὸν Ἀτρειδέων ἐς Ἴλιον, μήτε τὸν Μυσῶν τε καὶ Τευκρῶν τὸν πρὸ τῶν Τρωικῶν γενόμενον, οἱ διαβάντες ἐς τὴν Εὐρώπην κατὰ Βόσπορον τοὺς τε Θρήικας κατεστρέψαντο πάντας καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἴόνιον πόντον κατέβησαν, μέχρι τε Πηγειοῦ ποταμοῦ τὸ πρὸς μεσαμβρίας ἤλασαν. (7.20.2)

“For of all the armies of which we know, this was by far the greatest, inasmuch as no army seemed to amount to anything compared to this one. Not Darius’s army against the Scythians. Not the Scythian army, which, pursuing the Cimmerians, fell upon the land of the Medes, and subdued and possessed nearly all of Upper Asia (on account of which Darius was attempting to exact vengeance). Not the army of the sons of Atreus against Ilium according to the tales. Not the army of the Mysians and the Teucrians before the time of the Trojans, who crossed into Europe over the Bosphorus, subdued all the Thracians, went up to the Ionian Sea, and drove south down to the Peneus River.”

The rhetorical choice of the heightened superlative (πολλῶ δὴ μέγιστος) and the high density of words meaning “nothing” (παρὰ τοῦτον μηδένα φαίνεσθαι) or “everything” (πάντα τὰ ἄνω τῆς Ἀσίας καταστρεψάμενοι ἐνέμοντο... τοὺς τε Θρήικας κατεστρέψαντο πάντας) overwhelms the reader with the concept of greatness. Herodotus’ *amplificatio* derives its strength from the renown of past state-of-the-art forces, and since the Persian military completely puts them to shame, the more Herodotus magnifies the power and achievement of the Scythians, Mysians, and Teucrians, the more persuasive his assertion that the Persian Wars were the greatest wars of all time becomes. In sum, through its use of superlatives and favorable contrast with past examples, this vignette from Herodotus is a model example of how *amplificatio* would come to be used in the Greek (and later Roman) historiographical tradition.

In his *Peloponnesian War* Thucydides employs *amplificatio* in a similar way, also marked by the appearance of superlatives and the comparison of the Peloponnesian War’s greatness to that of all that came before it. His opening remarks

provide an excellent example:

Θουκυδίδης Ἀθηναῖος ξυνέγραψε τὸν πόλεμον τῶν Πελοποννησίων καὶ Ἀθηναίων, ὡς ἐπολέμησαν πρὸς ἀλλήλους, ἀρξάμενος εὐθὺς καθισταμένου καὶ ἐλπίσας μέγαν τε ἔσεσθαι καὶ ἀξιολογώτατον τῶν προγεγενημένων, τεκμαιρόμενος ὅτι ἀκμάζοντές τε ἦσαν ἐς αὐτὸν ἀμφοτέροι παρασκευῇ τῇ πάσῃ καὶ τὸ ἄλλο Ἑλληνικὸν ὄρων ξυνιστάμενον πρὸς ἐκατέρους, τὸ μὲν εὐθὺς, τὸ δὲ καὶ διανοούμενον. κίνησις γὰρ αὕτη μεγίστη δὴ τοῖς Ἑλλησιν ἐγένετο καὶ μέρει τινὶ τῶν βαρβάρων, ὡς δὲ εἰπεῖν καὶ ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἀνθρώπων. τὰ γὰρ πρὸ αὐτῶν καὶ τὰ ἔτι παλαιότερα σαφῶς μὲν εὐρεῖν διὰ χρόνου πλῆθος ἀδύνατα ἦν, ἐκ δὲ τεκμηρίων ὧν ἐπὶ μακρότατον σκοποῦντί μοι πιστεῦσαι ξυμβαίνει οὐ μεγάλα νομίζω γενέσθαι οὔτε κατὰ τοὺς πολέμους οὔτε ἐς τὰ ἄλλα. (Thuc. 1.1.1-3)

“Thucydides the Athenian wrote down the War between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, as they began to war against each other, and he started immediately when war came. He hoped the war would be great and more memorable than those that preceded it, having judged that both sides in the war were in their prime, in all their power, and having seen each Greek faction joining either side, some immediately and others intending to join. For this was the greatest movement among the Greeks, as well as a certain portion of the barbarians, and even among the majority of humans, so to speak. For the events before these ones and the events older still cannot be clearly found out on account of the lapse of time, but from the evidence that I trust from examining as far back as possible, I do not think that great events, either in wars or in anything else, had happened.”

Here Thucydides is clearly responding to Herodotus’ use of *amplificatio*, but instead of simply mimicking Herodotus, Thucydides has raised the stakes. These three opening lines feature four superlatives (ἀξιολογώτατον “most worthy of mention”; μεγίστη “greatest”; πλεῖστον ἀνθρώπων “the majority of humans”; μακρότατον “as far back as possible”) alongside phrases that approximate superlatives by implication (“ἀκμάζοντές “in their prime”; παρασκευῇ τῇ πάσῃ “in all their power”). Furthermore, the terms in which he compares his history

to past histories are much more sweeping than Herodotus' phrasing. For Thucydides, nothing, when compared with the Peloponnesian War, can be called great at all (οὐ μέγιστα νομίζω γενέσθαι), not the Persian War that was so highly lauded by his predecessor, and definitely not Homer's mythical battles.

By responding to Herodotus' claims of greatness with his own heightened stress on *amplificatio*, Thucydides ensured that the rhetorical technique would be a foundational trope for the emerging discipline of historical composition. The generations following Thucydides employed *amplificatio* in new ways: Theopompus and the historians of Alexander focus on the magnification of an individual's greatness (Philip II and Alexander the Great, respectively)⁶, but following the establishment of Roman hegemony over the Mediterranean, authors like Polybius amplify the universality of their histories.⁷ Instead of grounding their histories in a single subject, these authors use the new and unprecedented unity of the Mediterranean to focus on the interconnectedness of the events and peoples of the civilized world.

Josephus himself, in his earlier history of the Jewish revolt against Roman occupation, adopts a universal focus in his *amplificatio*, as we see here in the opening lines of the *BJ*:

Ἐπειδὴ τὸν Ἰουδαίων πρὸς Ῥωμαίους πόλεμον συστάντα μέγιστον οὐ μόνον τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς, σχεδὸν δὲ καὶ ὧν ἀκοῆν παρειλήφαμεν ἢ πόλεων πρὸς πόλεις ἢ ἐθνῶν ἔθνεσι συρραγέντων...(BJ 1.1)

“Since the war made by the Jews against the Romans was the greatest not only of the wars among us but nearly also of the wars which we have ascertained by hearing, wars fought between either cities or nations...”

Marincola sees in Josephus's treatment of the Jewish revolt the historian “following in Thucydides' footsteps,”⁸ which is certainly evident; these lines hearken back to Thucydides specifically through the use of μέγιστος and the comparison to all previous combat referenced broadly and vaguely. However, the influence of Polybius' universalizing influence is also palpable in the ensuing lines, which, with their rapid-fire succession of

peoples and localities,⁹ bring the entirety of the known world into view and into the war. Therefore, Josephus at the very beginning of this work and therefore his histories as a whole establishes himself as having the historiographical chops to join the classical tradition, a skillful and necessary maneuver given his outsider status as a Jewish freedman living in Rome.

Given the Greek historiographical tradition and Josephus's aforementioned addition to it with his *Jewish War*, it is no surprise that *amplificatio* features prominently in his later *Against Apion*, considered the most refined and polished work in Josephus's oeuvre.¹⁰ He focuses his employment of *amplificatio* in the introductory and concluding sections of the two-book work. Within the first ten lines of the book, Josephus constructs a four-part *amplificatio* of his subject matter, the Jewish people and society, by magnifying the age of his people (παλαιότατόν, 1.1), the newness of Greek history-writing (νεωτάτη σχεδόν, 1.7), the antiquity and reliability of the Eastern historical tradition (ἀρχαιοτάτην τε καὶ μονιμωτάτην, 1.8), and by appealing directly to the best of the Greek historiographical tradition (ἀξιόπιστοτάτοις, 1.4). Since *Against Apion*, though not a typical history à la the *Jewish War*, is an *apologia* by means of historical criticism, Josephus's magnifications are crucial to the efficacy of his argument.

Josephus's first display of *amplificatio* comes in the first line of *Against Apion*, a summary of his objectives in his earlier *Jewish Antiquities*. Since Josephus both sets up *Against Apion* as an extended apologetic addendum to his *Antiquities* and also ensures it is readable as a stand-alone *apologia* in its own right, the restated thesis of his *Antiquities* also becomes the thesis of *Against Apion*. For that reason, though his first magnification occurs in material specifically about the *Antiquities*, passing over it here would be a mistake. Summing up his earlier work in a tricolon, Josephus states that his *Antiquities* in his estimation have made it clear "that [the Jewish people] is most ancient, that they had from the start a distinct identity, and how we began to settle the land we now possess" (ὅτι καὶ παλαιότατόν ἐστι καὶ τὴν πρώτην ὑπόστασιν ἔσχεν ἰδίαν, καὶ πῶς τὴν χώραν ἦν νῦν ἔχομεν κατώκησεν, 1.1). The magnification "most ancient" (παλαιότατόν) is so striking not only because it occurs so early in

the text but, more importantly, because it is the very first claim in *Against Apion* that Josephus makes about the Jewish people (περὶ τοῦ γένους ἡμῶν τῶν Ἰουδαίων, 1.1). Underscoring the importance of the magnification, Josephus constructs it without eliding the verb ἐστὶ, keeping the clause fully intact, and though his claim is bold enough, the presence of the καὶ signals that there is still more to come.

The more traditional claimant to “a most ancient” people in the Greek imagination would be the Egyptians, a sentiment that we begin to see in Herodotus’ *Histories*,¹¹ in which the Egyptians believe they are the first people (πρώτους...πάντων ἀνθρώπων, Hdt. 2.2) and in which an account occurs of the Greek historian Hecataeus tracing back his family only sixteen generations in contrast to an Egyptian priest tracing his ancestry back three hundred and forty-five generations (Hdt. 2.143). Josephus is likely operating under the assumption that his readers would naturally associate the designation of “oldest” with the Egyptians and not the Jews, especially because the prevailing view in the first century CE was that the Jewish people were originally a group who splintered off from the Egyptians,¹² a view Josephus spends a large part of Book 1 of *Against Apion* (1.219-320) refuting in specific and vehement terms (1.252-3; 278; 313-314). This reading of the magnifier παλαιότατόν is supported by the following clause, “that [the Jewish people] had from the start a distinct identity” (τὴν πρώτην ὑπόστασιν ἔσχεν ἰδίαν, 1.1), in which the word ἴδιος carries the connotation of ethnic distinctiveness and independence.¹³ In light of this purported Egyptian origin story, then, Josephus’s magnification sets Judea on the same plane as Egypt; just the unadorned statement “they are most ancient” (παλαιότατόν ἐστὶ) Josephus anticipates the whole of his extended argument against an Egyptian origin for the Jewish people later in the work.

Although it might seem plausible to construe the superlative παλαιότατος as meaning “the oldest people of all,” Josephus’s *amplificatio* does not require it to mean so, and moreover, Greek grammar hints that it does not. According to Smyth, “the superlative expresses either the highest degree of a quality (the *relative* superlative...) or a very high degree of a quality (the *absolute* superlative, which does not take the

article...).”¹⁴ With the absence of an article, Josephus’s designation of *παλαιότατος* appears to be an absolute superlative. If it were otherwise, we would expect him to include sections within *Against Apion* in which Josephus explicitly argues that the Jews are the original people and in which he contrasts their age to the peoples thought of as oldest. However, Josephus never makes the specific argument that the Jews were the first people. Moreover, the nature of Jewish ancestry is complicated in *Against Apion*. He reports the various beliefs that the Jewish people came from the Arabians (1.82-83) and from the Indians (1.179) without contradicting either of them. In Book 1 he identifies the Chaldeans as the ancestors of the Jewish people (*ἀρχηγοί*, 1.71), citing the Jewish records (*ἀναγραφαῖς Ἰουδαίων*, 1.71), in all likelihood referring to the Torah’s claim that Abraham was from “Ur of the Chaldeans” (Gen. 11:31), but he uses the same term *ἀρχηγός* in calling Noah “the founder of our race” (*ὁ τοῦ γένους ἡμῶν ἀρχηγός*, 1.130). What the magnifier *παλαιότατος* does unquestionably get across is that the Jewish people date back to time immemorial, and consequently, in a classic example of *amplificatio*, their old, old age is so great that Josephus must write about them.

Josephus stands at a crossroads of Greek and Jewish thought, and this position comes into play in his *amplificatio* of Greek historiography itself, in which he contrasts when the Greeks began to write history with how long Eastern peoples have kept records:

πάντων δὲ νεωτάτη σχεδὸν ἐστὶ παρ’ αὐτοῖς ἢ περὶ τοῦ συγγράφειν τὰς ἱστορίας ἐπιμέλεια. τὰ μέντοι παρ’ Αἰγυπτίοις τε καὶ Χαλδαίοις καὶ Φοίνιξιν, ἐῶ γὰρ νῦν ἡμᾶς ἐκείνοις συγκαταλέγειν, αὐτοὶ δὴπουθεν ὁμολογοῦσιν ἀρχαιοτάτην τε καὶ μονιμοτάτην ἔχειν τῆς μνήμης τὴν παράδοσιν (1.7-9).

As in the examples from Herodotus and Thucydides, here Josephus collects superlatives (*νεωτάτη*, *ἀρχαιοτάτη*, *μονιμοτάτην*) and rests his *amplificatio* upon a contrast between the Greek historiographical tradition and the histories of the East, magnifying both in different ways. The sentiment is similar to the way in which Herodotus magnifies Xerxes’ forces by doing the same to the great armies that came before him, but Josephus

employs a different methodology. Here, he magnifies the newness (νεωτάτη) of Greek history-writing, and at the same time he magnifies the antiquity (ἀρχαιοτάτην) and lasting quality (μονιμωτάτην) of Eastern histories. In the list of Eastern peoples Josephus conspicuously omits the Jews and mentions that he will at a later time; since Josephus has not yet established his people's antiquity in this text or the methodology of their record-keeping, he cannot yet name the Jewish people among peoples the Greeks themselves (αὐτοῖ) respect as historical authorities. But it is exactly through the explicit lack of naming them, through this *praeteritio*, that Josephus applies his magnification of Eastern history to the Jews, and the inclusion of “for now” (νῦν) suggests that by the time he has finished, the Jewish histories will be shown to be worthy of just as much respect as those of Egypt. His *praeteritio* anticipates 1.29, where he moves to his argument that of these “most ancient” and “most stable” Eastern historical traditions, the best (πλείω, 1.29; μετὰ πολλῆς ἀκριβείας, 1.29) is Jewish history due to the character of its priestly authors (1.30-6) and its constant composition by eyewitness (1.37-8). In performing this maneuver, Josephus maintains the expectations of Greek historiography while at the same time drawing on the authority of an older, better preserved tradition, and, if he is to be believed, one that is even more respected by the Greeks than their own.

The final example of *amplificatio* in the opening lines of *Against Apion* is one of the most striking. Josephus adds to his program a direct appeal to the authority of the Greek historiographical tradition:

χρήσομαι δὲ τῶν μὲν ὑπ' ἐμοῦ λεγομένων μάρτυσι τοῖς ἀξιοπιστοτάτοις εἶναι περὶ πάσης ἀρχαιολογίας ὑπὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων κεκριμένοις, τοὺς δὲ βλασφήμως περὶ ἡμῶν καὶ ψευδῶς γεγραφότας αὐτοὺς δι' ἑαυτῶν ἐλεγχομένους παρέξω (1.4-5).

“I will employ as witnesses to my statements those who have been judged by the Greeks to be the most trustworthy concerning all antiquity, and I will show that those who have written slanderously and falsely about us are refuted by themselves.”

The scene Josephus presents is rich with court imagery: the

historian has summoned the Greek-speaking historians who have written on ancient history as his “witnesses” (μάρτυσι), and of the many words that could mean “believed” or “thought” or “considered” here, Josephus uses a form of κρίνω, one with judicial connotations. In a sense, then, these authors have already had their trial by the Greeks (ὕπὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων κεκριμένοις) and have been found “the most trustworthy” (ἀξιοπιστοτάτοις), and though Josephus is here prosecuting the slanderers and deniers (1.5), his identity as a historian associates him with his witnesses. *Against Apion* is on the offense in its refutations of writers like Apion, but as an *apologia* it is also on the defensive, especially in a world after the Jewish revolt failed. In much the same way, then, Josephus is also pleading his case as a historian of the Jews, hoping to be judged “most trustworthy” as well.

The *amplificatio* of the Greek historiographical tradition through his invocation of the Greek historians means that Josephus is sharing in their tradition. However, as a participant in the tradition, he is not simply rehashing the findings of his predecessors or following their methods to the letter. Rather, as Marincola summarizes, every historian “[distinguishes] himself from competitors, even if at the same time portraying himself as a continuator of some great and worthy predecessor. By such a process of contrast and continuity he seeks to mark out for himself a place in the historiographical tradition.”¹⁵ Therefore, when Josephus calls the historians as his witnesses, he is not just raising himself to their level, but since he is compiling and comparing their work, Josephus is improving upon their work and adding to the tradition. The historical criticism to follow within *Against Apion* by itself clearly demonstrates the power Josephus as a current historian wields over the works of his predecessors, such as Hecataeus or Chaeremon, since through his analysis he can affirm or refute what has been passed down. By critiquing Greek historiography with its own standards, Josephus demonstrates here in the introduction to *Against Apion* that though it is an intensely traditional and conservative discipline, Greek historiography is in a perpetual state of refinement, expansion, and growth.

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Notes

¹ See Barclay (2013) for a more comprehensive chronology of the *Jewish Antiquities*, the *Jewish War*, the *Life*, and *Against Apion*.

² Though a Jewish author, Josephus is commonly thought to be writing in the classical historiographical tradition due to his style and devices. For the examples of the monographic form of the *Jewish War* and Josephus's modeling (at least in name) of the *Jewish Antiquities* on Dionysius of Halicarnassus's *Roman Antiquities*, see Marincola (2003), 17.

³ See Lanham (1991), 8-9 for analysis of the term's rhetorical methodology.

⁴ See Hdt. 1.1.0, where Herodotus has written his *Histories* "lest the great and wonderful deeds done by both the Greeks and the barbarians go without fame" (μήτε ἔργα μέγала τε καὶ θωμαστά, τὰ μὲν Ἑλλησι τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα, ἀκλεῖα γένηται).

⁵ Translations provided are original excepted when noted otherwise.

⁶ Marincola (2003), 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸ Marincola (2003), 38.

⁹ Besides the Jews and the Romans, Josephus manages to name the Euphrates River, the Gauls, the Celts, the Greeks, the Parthians, the Babylonians, the Arabians, and the Assyrians all in a breath or two (*BJ* 1.4-6).

¹⁰ Barclay (2016), 75.

¹¹ The Homeric tradition precedes Herodotus, but of the two words Josephus uses for "old" or "ancient," *παλαιός* and *ἀρχαῖος*, the former appears in the positive degree exclusively except in Book XXIII and is used to describe the age of individuals, not entire peoples, while the latter word does not appear. Therefore, I turn to Herodotus as the earliest authoritative source that addresses the issue of the earliest people.

¹² Tac. *Hist.* 5.3.

¹³ For a similar use of the word, see Hdt. 4.18, where Herodotus analogously characterizes the anthropophagi as "a separate nation and definitely not Scythian" (ἔθνος ἴδιον καὶ οὐδαμῶς Σκυθικόν).

¹⁴ Smyth (1920), 282.

¹⁵ Marincola (2003), 218.