Introduction

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You may ask : yet another book on Roman power ? With so many studies on this very topic one cannot help but wonder if anything remains to be done besides publishing new archaeological findings or new epigraphic materials ? Studies pertaining to the concrete symbols of Roman power – such as coins, statues etc., and the representations conveyed through these media – are particularly numerous ; several volumes of the research network « Impact of Empire » pertain to this topic.[[1]](#footnote-1) In such studies, Roman power is often equated with imperial power, that is, the power of the emperor. However, studying representations of the emperor, the imperial family, or members of the imperial administration does not come close to exhausting the subject ; Roman power, which may also be understood as overlapping to a great extent with Roman imperialism, became a prominent issue in the ancient world long before the Principate. It was first and foremost experienced by the Greeks, the Jews, the Gauls, and other peoples in the form of military power, as conquest and domination, even if it cannot be fully reduced to these aspects.

Rituals of power such as celebrations of victory, both in Rome and in its provinces, have also received significant scholarly attention, as exemplified, for example, in Mary Beard’s book on the Roman triumph (Beard 2007), in Simon R. F. Price’s monograph *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Price 1985), as well as in Hadrien Bru’s book *Le pouvoir impérial dans les provinces syriennes. Représentations et célébrations d’Auguste à Constantin (31 av. J.-C. – 337 ap. J.-C.)* (Bru 2011) – especially the section on games, festivals and other celebrations of Roman imperial power.

Studies related to discourses of power – such as Myles Lavan’s illuminating monograph on the language of slavery and servitude (*Slaves to Rome: Paradigms of Empire in Roman Culture* [Lavan 2013]) – also represent an important contribution. Beyond the Roman discourses themselves, provincial perceptions and the discursive reception of Roman power have been studied in connection to Greek sources (epigraphic ones in particular, as well as the writings of the Second Sophistic), Egyptian ones (for example the *Acts of the Alexandrian Martyrs*), and Jewish ones.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In addition, countless studies address the mechanisms of Roman power: the evolution of Rome’s political institutions, the operation of the Roman imperial administration, the role of the army, and the legal role played by the emperor to name a few popular topics ; these studies tackle the issue of “Roman power at work” rather than issues of representation, and often overlap with the study of Roman rule. In such a context, “Roman power” is more or less synonymous with “Roman rule” or “Roman Empire”. This is also the case in studies about the empire’s rise and fall, which further contribute to our understanding of Roman power, focusing on factors that strengthened the empire or undermined it. It is a topic which has attracted the attention of numerous historians, from Antiquity until the present, who have been fascinated by the Romans’ remarkable capacity not only to conquer lands, but also to maintain their sovereignty over them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Power is an elusive notion, with many ramifications. It ranges from “raw” power, closely associated with physical violence, to more institutionalized forms of power, leading to a socio-political status quo that may be rejected, but also accepted by those who do not actively wield power.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Max Weber’s terminology, this is the distinction between *Macht* and *Herrschaft*.[[5]](#footnote-5) When power is to be defined as *Herrschaft* rather than *Macht*, it may also be viewed as the product of negotiation. As Greg Woolf argues in his chapter (see below), inspired by the work of Foucault, power is not a material asset that can be possessed or lost to others. It is dynamic, relational, and co-constructed. The notion of power also bears a close affinity to other fields of human activity or thought, such as religion or ethics. In the ancient world, power and the divine were closely intertwined, and in the eyes of many, the support of the gods was a prerequisite for securing power. Conversely, both religious and philosophical discourses formulated norms that codified and delineated the exercise of power.

The articles gathered in this volume reflect the diversity of meanings associated with the word power. The political and administrative apparatus of the empire and the daily routine of the functioning of the Roman Empire are not the focus of the present book. Together with the members of the conference’s scientific committee – Hervé Inglebert, Jonathan Price, Emmanuelle Rosso Caponio and Greg Woolf, whom I warmly thank for their support and collaboration – we decided to create a volume which would provide a multi-faceted investigation into how the many peoples inhabiting Rome’s vast empire actually perceived, experienced, and reacted to Roman power. More precisely, we wished to explore how they dealt with Roman power through their religious and political rituals ; what they regarded as the empire’s distinctive features, as well as its particular limitations and weaknesses ; what forms of criticism they developed towards the way Romans exercised power ; and what kind of impact the encounter with Roman power had upon the ways various groups living within the empire defined themselves and reflected about power in general. By « encounter with Roman power », I mean not only the confrontation with the concrete manifestations of Roman power – such as political domination, taxation, and military violence – but also with the ideological expressions of power. Similarly, provincial reactions range from concrete political decisions – expressions of political loyalty, such as the development of the imperial cult, or alternatively revolts – to ideological discourses. The articles included in this volume therefore include studies dealing with both rituals and discourses, be they political, historiographical, dedicatory, philosophical, religious, etc.

This volume is also unusual in bringing Jewish, and especially rabbinic, sources and perspectives together with Roman, Greek or Christian ones. This is a natural consequence of its being part of the research program « Judaism and Rome », which aims to study the impact of Roman imperialism upon Judaism in Antiquity, especially as far as the notions of power, law, and citizenship (or membership within a given people) are concerned. This particular volume is part of a broader endeavour to bring together historians of the Roman world and scholars of rabbinic literature, a field that tends to remain secluded due to the hermetic and technical character of rabbinic sources. Instead of being organized according to the nature of the sources dealt with in each chapter – Roman, Greek, Jewish, Christian or literary, iconographic, numismatic – this book is divided into thematic sections that bring together different perspectives on similar topics, sometimes within the same chapter.

I must emphasize from the outset that the Jewish sources pertaining to Rome are replete with musings over the nature of Roman power, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as criticisms of Rome, and speculations regarding its downfall. As Adiel Schremer notes in his book *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* : « Throughout late antiquity, the “significant other” for Palestinian rabbis remained the Roman Empire, and one of the religious issues with which they were most occupied was the empire’s power and the religious challenge that it posed to God’s sovereignty ».[[6]](#footnote-6) Of course, there were also Jews who sided with the Romans. For example, the famous Tiberius Julius Alexander, Philo’s nephew, who was a Roman citizen, became procurator of Judea in 46 under Claudius, prefect of Egypt in 66 under Nero, and eventually served as Titus’ advisor and commander of all the forces (*praefectus castrorum*) during the siege of Jerusalem in 70. Here is an example of a Jew who pursued a successful career in service of the empire. And he was not alone. There were other Jews, both before the 1st century CE and afterwards, who participated in local civic institutions, in the Roman imperial administration, and likely in the Roman army as well (although these cases are more difficult to document). Nevertheless, most of the Jewish sources that have come down to us considered Rome – Roman power, Roman victories, and Roman hegemony – to be problematic and challenging in one way or another.

Jews were neither alone nor isolated in their mostly negative perception of Roman power, and their ways of dealing with it need to be compared to other, often more nuanced ways of perceiving Roman power and coping with it found in provincial discourses, as well as to self-critical views stemming from Roman society itself.

For example, the question of what made the Roman Empire different from other empires was of interest to many people, not just to the Jews. This issue, often associated with the secret of Rome’s successes, already lay at the core of Polybius’ work, and continued to be discussed in works composed in Late Antiquity. At that time, many also wondered whether the empire would endure the growing barbarian onslaught, and for how long. Some Roman authors expressed pessimistic views of the future because they believed Roman society had strayed from its simple origins and had been corrupted by greed, immorality, personal ambition, and inner divisions. There were also many who were both provincials and Romans, members of the ruling classes who were at the same time subjects of the empire, nervous partners in an imperial project the viability and justice of which they often doubted. Anxieties about the failings of Roman power might have a religious dimension, as well, such as concern for the neglect of traditional cults, or, once the empire became Christian, the spread of heresy. In short, questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the empire were relevant to many people hailing from different groups and contexts, for various reasons, and sometimes with opposing expectations.

The first question tackled in this volume is that of how Rome compared to previous empires, a topic which attracted significant attention from ancient writers. This first section includes three articles. First, in « Rome as the Last Universal Empire in the Ideological Discourse of the 2nd Century BCE », Federico Russo addresses Rome’s role as a 5th universal empire, succeeding the four world empires of Greek historiography : the Assyrians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Macedonians. He examines Greek and Latin literary sources beginning in the 2nd century BCE – Polybius, Aemilius Sura quoted in Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* (1.6.6), Florus, and Appian – that show that the idea of Rome as the 5th universal empire had developed already in the 2nd century BCE, after the Roman victories in the third Macedonian war and the sixth Syrian war. This is as opposed to the prevailing scholarly view that dates such a notion to the 1st century BCE or the very beginning of the 1st century CE. Russ further notes that Roman imperialism and power were perceived by the Greeks – and probably others as well – as universal as early as the 2nd century BCE. Moreover, if a 2nd century dating of Aemilius Sura is to be believed – a point that remains uncertain – it would indicate that Romans too started from early on – long before Vergil – to envision their rule as universal in character.

The scheme of four or five empires was known to the Jews as well, as Nadav Sharon’s chapter demonstrates. In « Rome and the Four-Empires Scheme in Pre-Rabbinic Jewish Literature », Sharon shows how Jewish authors used and sometimes combined two different models: the Greek or Greco-Roman scheme, and the notion of four successive empires found in the Book of Daniel. For example, whereas the former prevails in the *Fourth Sibylline Oracle*, the Danielic model dominates in the writings of Josephus and in late, post-70 apocalyptic texts, such as *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*. It is mainly in Jewish writings from the 1st century CE that post-date the destruction of the Jerusalem temple that the fourth empire in Daniel is identified with Rome, likely the result of the strong, long-lasting association of the Danielic fourth empire with Greece, which had prevented it from being identified with Rome at an earlier date. The growing use of the Greco-Roman scheme by Jews or the idea of Rome as the last empire, which Jews reformulated and adapted to their needs, is to be understood as a form of discursive resistance (an expression Sharon borrows from Tim Whitmarsh, who uses it in the context of the Second Sophistic). Hence, in the *Fourth Sibylline Oracle*, Rome’s identification with the fifth empire is cast as a prophecy, including a prediction of Rome’s eventual fall, explained as the Jewish God’s punishment of Rome for the harm it has inflicted upon the Jews. In the end, the acknowledgment of the universal dimension of Rome’s empire and power does not prevent the Jewish authors studied by Sharon from foreseeing its collapse, even when they do not encourage active resistance.

In « Comparer Rome, Alexandre et Babylone : la question de l’exceptionnalité de l’empire de Rome aux IVe-VIe siècles », Hervé Inglebert sheds further light on the way ancients compared Rome to previous empires. His focus is on Christian writers – especially Aphraates in the 4th century, and Orosius and Augustine in the 5th – who had inherited different models to reflect on the Roman Empire’s place in universal history, including that of the succession of four or five universal empires. They approached this issue both theologically and historically. As far as the historical (or historico-religious) perspective is concerned, Christians favoured two forms of comparison. First, the comparison between the Roman Empire and that of Alexander, which was popular among the Greeks and pertained to the geographical extent of the empire or its moral standards, could also be found occasionally in the writings of Christian authors. Second, especially in the period following the sack of Rome in 410, in the writings of Orosius and Augustine, a historical (and not merely typological) comparison between Rome and Babylon was developed. In Orosius’ work, parallels were drawn between various events that had supposedly taken place during both the Babylonian and Roman periods. The purpose of the comparison is to point to Roman superiority, linking it to the advent of Christianity. Generally speaking, in the eyes of Christian authors, the Roman Empire was exceptional because of the chronological concomitance of its beginnings with Christ’s birth, and, for later writers, due to its Christianized character. Augustine distinguished himself from previous Christian authors in his attempt to dissociate the fate of Rome from that of Christianity, connecting the latter with the heavenly Jerusalem, or heavenly city, rather than with the earthly Rome.

The second section of the book is devoted to the dynamics of the power relationship between Rome and the provincials, that is, to experiences of Roman power and their representations, be it through texts, iconography or rituals. It opens with Greg Woolf’s challenging call to avoid viewing Romans and provincials in a dichotomic light. As Woolf writes, « We need to avoid the ideological trap set by an imperial rhetoric that divides the world into Romans and Others ». Woolf argues that the binary opposition between Romans and Roman subjects must be abandoned, as power was exercised first and foremost by powerful people, including members of the provincial elites, upon those who were weaker, rather than by Romans upon non-Romans. The mechanism of receiving citizenship transformed many provincials into new Romans, who nevertheless continued to be deeply invested in their local civic life. Moreover, wealthy non-Romans also belonged to the ruling elites. Drawing on critiques and reformulations of the concept of power by social theorists, Greg Woolf’s article « explores the operation of power in two spheres, first at the centre of the empire where emperors, aristocrats and other courtiers competed for influence, and second in the provinces where identity politics and economic interests intersected in different ways. It argues for conceptualizing power in terms of webs of influence, networks and complexes of relationships ».

Greg Woolf’s analysis is illustrated in Onno van Nijf’s and Sam van Dijk’s article on the Greek festival of the Romaia honouring the goddess Thea Romē, which, from roughly 200 BCE onwards, was developed as a religious response to the rise of Roman power. Before the Principate, Greek cities offered honours, cults and festivals to Roman individuals, as they had once done for Hellenistic kings. The Romans could also be honoured collectively, and cults and honours could be extended to personifications and abstractions that stood for Rome, including the *Populus Romanus* (*Dēmos Romaiōn*). Later, however, from the reign of Augustus onward, the imperial cult became the main manifestation of these religious responses to Roman power. It originated from local elites who had an interest in cultivating an accommodating, long-standing relationship with the Roman authorities. However, the cults also had to be accepted by the local population, if a meaningful connection with Rome was to be established. Van Nijf and van Dijk suggest that the festival setting of the cult played a crucial role in its acceptance by the local population. Despite being a celebration of Rome, the Romaia festival stemmed from a tradition of Greek collective practices that strengthened communal identities. The ritual activities performed by participants, such as singing hymns honouring Rome, helped to cultivate pro-Roman feelings. As the authors put it, « Festivals organisers used symbolic gifts, mass expressions of gratitude, collective hymn-singing, and other means to mobilise the local populations behind the leadership of Rome ». Finally, through the analysis of two case studies, Stratonikeia (and Assos) and Thespiai, the authors show that « approaching festivals from the perspective of network theory helps us to understand how they contributed to the spread of Roman influence ».

Emmanuelle Rosso Caponio’s chapter, « Personnifications de Rome et du pouvoir romain en Asie Mineure : quelques exemples », provides further examples of how Greek elites in the East dealt with Roman power as well as illustrating Roman self-representations and discourses. Emmanuelle Rosso Caponio’s analysis focuses on political personifications associated with Roman power on three monuments and dedications : the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias, the Arch of Pergē, and the foundation of C. Vibius Salutaris in Ephesus, which allow us to understand « the specificities of Roman power as seen by the civic communities in the Greek-speaking provinces of the empire and to understand the articulation of imperial and local power ». The unique iconographic programme of Aphrodisias revolved around the theme of victorious war, through the representation of deities such as Ares and Athena, of victorious emperors (such as Tiberius), and of Rome herself, the very incarnation of power – the name *Rhōmē* in Greek means force – as well as referring to the result of victorious action. The Arch of Pergē, built under the Flavians, featured statues of the local deities Artemis and Apollo, of Roman emperors, as well as statues of the personified city of Pergē, and of *Eunomia Sebastē*, imperial justice and protection, a virtue closely associated with the ideal of *Pax Romana*, that is, with peace and prosperity. In the case of the donation of C. Vibius Salutaris in Ephesus, we are dealing with the creation of a ritualized procession from and to the temple of Artemis, which featured statues of the gods, of members of the imperial family, of personifications of both local and Roman institutions or political groups (such as the Senate, the Roman people, and the equestrian order for Rome ; the Boulē, the Gerousia, the Ephebeia in the case of Ephesus), as well as a statue of an imperial virtue, Sebastē Homonoia Chrysophoros, the equivalent of Concordia Augusta. In this case, the organisation of the city and that of the empire are represented as parallel, the organization of the procession reflecting an effort to conceptualize the relationship between Roman institutions and local authorities. In the donation of C. Vibius Salutaris, the main rationale offered for the endurance of Roman hegemony is the complementary relationship between local and Roman institutional frameworks. The celebration of imperial virtues had no Hellenistic precedent – there was no cult of the virtues of the Hellenistic kings ; it was an original Latin practice. The three examples studied here demonstrate the significant loyalty to messages emanating from the sources imperial power itself. The personifications of Roman imperial virtues, benefits, and institutions combined to create an ideal representation of Roman rule and power, which was also the visual equivalent of a literary *miroir au prince*.

In Aphrodisias, where Aphrodite-Venus was the chief civic deity, the Julio-Claudian claim of Venusian ancestry was skilfully exploited to build a privileged relationship with Rome. Yet the case of the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias, with its representations of Roman emperors violently subduing female personifications of new provinces, also shows that the power relationship between Rome and the provincials was in some cases perceived and represented by the Greeks as brutal and unbalanced. The brutality of Roman domination and the suppression of revolts is evident in Roman sources as well, sometimes even explicitly, drawing our attention to another aspect of the power relationship between Rome and the provincial populations. In her chapter « The (Lost) Arch of Titus : The Visibility and Prominence of Victory in Flavian Rome », Caroline Barron examines how the Flavian victory against the Judeans was commemorated in the city of Rome through the construction of numerous buildings : two monumental arches, the Colosseum, and the Temple of Peace. Barron’s chapter deals with Roman visual representations, via monuments and their inscriptions, of Roman power and victory against a specific people, the *gens Iudaeorum*, and its capital city Jerusalem. The now lost Arch of Titus in the Circus Maximus bore an inscription celebrating the Flavian victory, claiming to have achieved something unique in « taming » the Judean (or Jewish) people and destroying the city of Jerusalem. Barron shows that this inscription contributes significantly to our understanding of how the Flavian dynasty perceived their victory – and how they used it to advertise their military might and establish their rule as the rightful heirs to Augustus – providing more information than the better-known Arch of Titus on the Roman forum. However, she also notes that it must be read together with the other elements of a broader visual programme.

Whereas Caroline Barron’s article examines a specific example of how the empire’s capacity to destroy was evoked and celebrated, Myles Lavan’s chapter is dedicated to a more systematic analysis of the language of destruction in Latin sources that discuss Roman power. It contributes to our understanding of how the Romans perceived their own power. As Myles Lavan writes, « Although the imperial elite did not think that they engaged in mass destruction widely or indiscriminately, they regarded the destruction of human populations and their landscapes as an essential aspect of Roman power ». A « language of erasure » continued to be used – verbs such as *deleo*, *excido*, *tollo* and *uasto*– even after the initial period of the conquests, in order to describe good government. From a visual perspective, representations of Roman soldiers destroying enemy settlements and slaughtering or enslaving entire families, such as those found on the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, were « elevated into symbols of the enduring triumph of the imperial order against the enemies that threatened it ». Although Roman authors frequently emphasized the Roman virtue of clemency, the characterization of enemies as barbarians, and the idea that some peoples were so untrustworthy that they were simply ungovernable, made annihilation seem not only justifiable but even necessary in the eyes of these authors.

The final article in this section, « Apollo, Christ, and Mithras : Constantine in Gallia Belgica », by Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, also deals with Roman construction projects and representations of power – in this case, Constantine’s strategies of communication used to consolidate his power. Elizabeth DePalma Digeser argues that the principal pagan and Christian accounts of Constantine’s reign share a vision of the emperor as « the divine warrior who slays the beast of darkness » – an image also compatible with the cult of Mithras, widely popular in Gallia Belgica. As she explains, « the deep and wide resonance of this image contributed not only to consolidating Constantine’s position, but also to sustaining its own remarkably long life as the archetype of the “good sovereign” ». This *imaginaire* of imperial power shows how Constantine managed to reign successfully for decades. In this chapter, where Roman power is tantamount to imperial rule, DePalma Digeser shows how the dichotomy between Romans and non-Romans is weakened even further by the spreading and mutual interaction between different models of imperial rule within the empire.

Having looked at the ways Roman power was acknowledged, celebrated, and even co-constructed, the next section focuses on critical reflections about the limitations of Roman power and its weaknesses, in the eyes of both Romans and provincials. First, in a chapter entitled « Gouverner l’empire, se gouverner soi-même : réflexions sur la notion de *maiestas* dans la littérature de la République et du Principat », Julien Dubouloz examines the extent to which it was necessary for a Roman magistrate or senator to “rule” over himself to be considered fit to rule Rome’s subjects. Dubouloz analyses Roman imperialism as a relationship to the Other, in the « souci de soi » – to use Michel Foucault’s expression – of the governing Roman aristocracy. His starting point is an anecdote told by Seneca the Elder (*Controversiae* 9.2) implying L. Flamininus, consul in 192 BCE, who had a prisoner executed in Gaul in order to please his lover. If the public behaviour of a Roman magistrate in the provinces was the responsibility of the Roman state, his misbehaviour represented a breach of the *maiestas* and the *fides* of the Roman people. The notion of *maiestas*, however, was not so much a legal category, as an intellectual tool, a way to situate a member of the senatorial aristocracy, and even members of the imperial house, within a hierarchical system of values. Julien Dubouloz’s chapter ends with a reflection about Josephus’ account of Agrippa II’s speech to the rebels in Jerusalem, in which he urges them to differentiate between Roman power and rule in general, and the behaviour of a specific procurator, Florus. It seems that the issue of the identification between Roman rule and the particular rule of a given magistrate was crucial in the eyes of both Romans and provincials, as it could represent a threat to the stability of the empire as well as the whole Roman imperial project.

In « Structural Weaknesses in Rome’s Power ? Greek Historians’ Views on Roman *Stasis*», Jonathan J. Price focuses on another potential threat to Roman hegemony and power, namely internal division and civil war, or *stasis* in Greek. Price examines the reflections of Greek historians, from Polybius to Appian, who analysed Roman power at length and admired the empire’s breadth and stability. At the end of the *Histories*, however, Polybius explicitly formulated the idea that Roman rule would come to an end, and that Rome’s fall would originate from internal causes as opposed to an external threat. While Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ perception of Roman rule was more optimistic, his treatment of the foundational fratricide between Romulus and Remus may be understood as suggesting that internal conflict could eventually spell the end of Roman power. In the case of Appian, Price draws attention to the length of his account of the civil wars that took place at the end of the Republic, and wonders whether « By inserting five books on the Roman civil wars into his panoramic history of the Roman Empire – whose ethnographical arrangement was designed to investigate cause and offer historical explanation – Appian could have been setting both the Roman Empire and its inherent danger of lapse into civil war into the context of universal human history».

Another threat to Roman power mentioned by ancient writers was that of displeasing the gods by not properly performing religious rituals ; that is, by not behaving « piously ». In « Power and Piety : Roman and Jewish Perspectives », Katell Berthelot shows that although Roman and Jewish notions of piety – *pietas* in Latin, *hessed* and other terms in Hebrew – differed to a great extent, Romans and Jews nevertheless shared common views concerning the link between military victory and divine support, or its corollary, the association between defeat and divine punishment. To put it simply, they shared the idea that power had a religious basis. Roman and Greek sources testify to the fact that Romans perceived and presented themselves as an exceptionally pious people. The same was true of Jews, even though they were perceived by Romans as superstitious. Berthelot examines how Roman victories against the Jews were associated in Roman and Jewish sources with Jewish superstition, impiety, or sin. Conversely, she shows how Israel’s faithfulness to the covenant and the commandments could be seen by Jews as a real threat to Roman power that would ultimately lead to Israel’s final victory against the empire. In opposition to Roman or pro-Roman sources, some Jewish authors maintained that the Romans were wicked and impious, and thus doomed to eventual defeat at the hands of the Jews and their God. However, some Jewish sources articulated the relationship between Roman power and Jewish piety in a less defiant light – the very existence and permanence of the Roman Empire was conceived as being dependent upon Jewish prayers and blessings, or the presence of Israel within the empire.

The final article in this section is that of Sébastien Morlet, « Ce que peut l’Empire : les caractéristiques et les limites du pouvoir romain d’après l’Histoire ecclésiastique d’Eusèbe de Césarée ». Morlet argues that apart from episodes of persecution, the Roman authorities were perceived by Eusebius as fairly supportive of Christianity, especially in view of their role in legally protecting Christians and punishing their opponents the Jews. That being said, in Eusebius’ view, the Roman Empire’s claim to universal rule was nothing but an illusion, as it was limited by its finite frontiers ; only Christ’s kingdom is truly universal and eternal. The third limitation of Roman power was the powerlessness of Roman authorities in the face of the Christian faith, which persisted even in times of persecution. Overall, Eusebius perceived Rome as an instrument of God’s will, its power being understood as subordinate to that of God. In similar fashion to approaches in the writings of Philo and some rabbinic texts,[[7]](#footnote-7) he conceived of Roman power as being dependent upon Christian prayers. Alternately, Roman power could depend on the emperors’ piety, an idea that was, *mutatis mutandis*, a traditional motif. However, Morlet argues that Eusebius’ understanding of Roman power went beyond the notion of a power based on divine support – in Eusebius’ vision, Divine Providence has full control over history and merely uses the Romans as an instrument to achieve its ends.

The fourth section of the book examines different examples of open criticism addressed to the Romans concerning the manner in which they exercised their power. This criticism was sometimes indirect, and in some cases echoed a reflection of the Romans themselves. Hence, in Marie Roux’s chapter, « Animalizing the Romans : The Use of Animal Metaphors by Ancient Authors to Criticize Roman Power or Its Agents », bestial images – the association of Rome with a wolf, in particular – are often used to portray Rome’s enemies by Roman authors. Such images are also found in the writings of several Christian authors, as well as in rabbinic literature, where the Romans are associated with the pig or the boar. Marie Roux shows that animal imagery, symbolizing a lack of humanity, could be employed as a form of criticism against Roman authorities, be it applied to the emperor, the representants of Rome in the provinces, or the Roman people as a whole. In non-Christian sources, bestial associations were generally employed to denounce tyranny, whereas in Christian sources, they imputed cruelty and greed, and were directed above all at emperors or Roman officials who persecuted Christians. Besides moral criticism, animal imagery could also be used to deliver political criticism, as the cases of Lactantius and Salvian of Marseille show.

In « Alexander the Great in the Jerusalem Talmud and Genesis Rabbah : A Critique of Roman Power, Greed and Cruelty », Yael Wilfand also deals with criticisms of Roman greed and cruelty. In rabbinic texts this criticism is partly indirect, as it is the figure of Alexander the Great who is targeted. Alexander was a popular figure during the 1st centuries CE, and was constantly referenced in debates about the nature of universal empires. Wilfand argues that the rabbinic texts she analyses « use the figure of Alexander to criticize Rome, specifically to refute the Roman illusion of unlimited power and its claim to a superior legal system, which in practice justified enriching the emperor’s coffers over protecting the lives of ordinary people ». Insofar as the rabbis viewed Rome as a continuation of the Hellenistic world, their choice to use the figure of Alexander to reflect about the nature of power and implicitly criticize Rome is not surprising. A comparison with parallel Babylonian rabbinic texts discussing Alexander highlights that such a use is typical of Palestinian rabbinic sources, which were composed in a Roman context.

Nathanael J. Andrade further broadens our perspective by taking into account the view of Syriac Christians from 3rd century Osrhoene, at a time when the region was being integrated into the Roman provincial system. In « Romans and Iranians : Experiences of Imperial Governance in Roman Mesopotamia », he shows how the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, the *Acts of Thomas* and the Edessene narrative about the apostle Addai portray Roman imperialism, contrasting it to either Iranian imperial hierarchies or fictional ones modelled on them. These Christian texts not only reflect upon the features that distinguished the Roman Empire from other imperial states, but also offer specific criticisms of the empire. Hence the Syriac *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, probably written in the wake of Osrhoene’s annexation to the Roman Empire and possibly shortly after 212 CE, presents the Romans as uniquely aggressive, intrusive, and rigid in their uniform application of their laws to conquered populations (the theme of the imposition of Roman rule and law is also what characterizes the Addai narrative). The Roman Empire is thus implicitly contrasted with the Parthian Empire, which is portrayed as accommodating the legal traditions of its diverse peoples. A different comparison is drawn in the *Acts of Thomas* : the Iranian, Zoroastrian authorities are represented as enacting state-sponsored violence against Christians in a way that is comparable to that of their Roman counterparts.

Although some of the articles mentioned above deal with explicit rabbinic perceptions and criticisms of Roman power, most Jewish texts from the Roman period address this issue only obliquely. While they do not actually describe Roman power, they do attest to how the encounter with Roman power could impact the way Jews reflected about their collective identity and their place within a Roman dominated world. During the 1st centuries CE, our literary sources consist mainly of rabbinic texts, and this over-representation is reflected in the chapters gathered in the last section of the book dedicated to the impact of Roman power upon Judaism, with the notable exception of Markus Vinzent’s article, which deals with Marcion.

Seth Schwartz’s contribution, « The Mishnah and the Limits of Roman Power », focuses on the case of the Mishnah, the first rabbinic work committed to writing at the beginning of the 3rd century CE, a loosely organized codification of Jewish law, based on biblical texts, customs and rabbinic oral traditions. Schwartz argues that even if the text is « legible as an artifact of the High Imperial East », it nevertheless represents « a very strong and elaborated form of cultural resistance to Roman rule ». In order to grasp the significance of the Mishnah in its historical and cultural setting, Schwartz compares it to other types of texts described as resistance literature : the Second Sophistic, early patristic literature, and the Greek and Demotic papyri produced by Egyptian priests. These literary artefacts display common features, and above all show that « their authors all exercised a surprising degree of cultural autonomy », the Mishnah being the most prominent example of such a trend. Moreover, according to Schwartz they had serious social and political implications and outcomes. The example of the Mishnah shows that even in deeply “Romanized” settings, local traditions not only persisted but developed, a fact that must be taken into account if one is to write a history of the empire that adequately reflects what took place beneath its surface.

The encounter with Rome seems to have had a significant impact on the rabbis’ relationship to history, writing, authorship, and literary culture in general. In « Jewish Books and Roman Readers : Censorship, Authorship, and the Rabbinic Library », Natalie Dohrmann shows how, in contrast to earlier Jewish writers such as the author of the *Letter of Aristeas* and Josephus, who adopted and imitated Greco-Roman literary standards in order to be included in the Greco-Roman “library”, the rabbis, while being no less affected by an imagined imperial reader and his library, nevertheless seek to undermine imperial logic. First, they dramatically demarcate and limit the extent of the sacred library, excluding both non-Jewish and Jewish books from it. Second, they refuse to trace extra-Scriptural knowledge to books. Third, they do not attribute works to individual persons and thus deny the concept of authorship. As Dohrmann writes, « Ironic then is that the particular rabbinic repackaging of “Torah” into a clearly demarcated book is part of a set of choices in medium, language, and genre by which the rabbis signal their awareness of and draw on, and yet at the same time *remove* themselves from, the vibrant book economy of the empire ». In short, the rabbis refuse to be literate in Rome’s shadow.

Along similar lines, Christine Hayes’s chapter, « Roman Power through Rabbinic Eyes : Tragedy or Comedy ? », considers the impact of Roman power on the rabbinic perception of history and theodicy. While many rabbis maintained that history was subject to divine control and was progressing towards a happy ending, the experience of Roman power and its brutality led other rabbis to express doubts about moral order in the universe, even at the end of times. The rabbinic identification of Rome with Esau, Israel’s twin brother, was sometimes accompanied by « an anxiety over the identity of the chosen son and the blurred moral distinction between these twinned peoples », as two eschatological fantasies show : in the first (b. Avod Zar. 2a-3b), God behaves like a cruel Roman tyrant ; in the second (b. Pes. 119a), David – « that most Roman of Israelite kings » – is exalted, against all moral logic, over the pious heroes of old. In short, Roman power defies moral logic, undermines belief in a happy conclusion to history, and suggests an arbitrary or capricious god, whose laughter resembles that of a Roman tyrant. Finally, Hayes notes how other talmudic sources also echo the fear that Israel too may be tragically transformed – or deformed – by its confrontation with Roman power.

Markus Vinzent argues that it was precisely this confrontation with Roman power that gave rise to a new form of Judaism – rather than a new Israel – which was none other than « Christianity » itself. In his article « “Christianity” : A Response to Roman-Jewish Conflict », Vinzent claims that Marcion invented a new Jewish cult, with many priestly, ascetic, and messianic elements, conceived as an antithesis to Pharisaic Judaism and the messianic movement of Bar Kokhba. This new cult concorded with a Herodian perspective on Judaism and on the Roman Empire, as Marcion’s mention of Tiberius and Pilate in the opening of his gospel indicates. In Vinzent’s perspective, « Marcion laid the foundation for the formation of a cult which was both a continuation of the “religion of Israel” but also consciously an act of subjugation to the Roman authorities ».

To conclude, Greg Woolf rightly questions a binary opposition between Romans and non-Romans, pointing out that political, social, economic and linguistic factors played an important role in the distinction between rulers and ruled. One cannot, however, ignore the accounts of some provincial sources, sometimes stemming from literary milieux that were not necessarily prosperous – as the example of the rabbis shows – and perceived Roman power as Roman and, even more acutely, perceived themselves as non-Romans. Modern historians must disentangle the mechanisms of power, including the power constructions produced by the ancient sources themselves, as well as take into account the fact that ancient perceptions could be authentically binary, reflecting a deliberate attempt to construct the Romans and their impressive power as the ultimate Other.

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1. See in particular the collective volume *The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power* (de Blois, Hekster et al. 2002), which includes many chapters on such representations, or the more recent monograph by Erika Manders, *Coining Images of Power: Patterns in the Representation of Roman Emperors on Imperial Coinage, A.D. 193–284* (Manders 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Studies of Jewish perceptions and representations of Roman power are numerous and pertain to different kinds of writings : the works of Philo and Josephus, apocalyptic writings, rabbinic literature, etc. See in particular de Lange 1978 ; Hadas-Lebel 1990 ; Har-Peled 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Ando 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The issue of consent to the power one is subjected to lies at the core of Ando 2001, but also of contemporary studies that are more theoretical, such as Lukes 2005 (who phrases the question as : « how is willing compliance to domination secured? », p. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Weber 1972, p. 28-29, 122-124. See also Gotter 2008, p. 181. According to Gotter, the Greeks did not distinguish between *Macht* and *Herrschaft*, between « power » and « rule », and « The fact that the Greek sources do not distinguish between “rule” and “power” has nothing to do with the vagueness of the concept, but with the uncontested expectation that anyone who had the potential to assert his will actually did so. In short, for the Greeks, “rule” and “power” were identical. What was almost entirely absent in Greek theorizing on power was a concept of sovereign government based on legitimacy or traditional acceptance. It was the Greek concept of rule (*Herrschaft*) that remained amorphous » (p. 199). By contrast, Gotter argues that « An understanding of power as an omnipresent force that pervades each society seems to have been absent from the political discourse of mid-Republican Rome », in which a more normative conception of power prevailed (p. 203). According to Gotter, this view is corroborated by « the fact that the Romans did not distinguish sharply between rulers and subjects » (p. 203). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Schremer 2010, p. IX-X. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Berthelot’s chapter in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)