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## There and Back Again: Tolkien and the Greco-Roman World



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Right – The One Ring shown on a page from J. R. R. Tolkien: The Lord of the Rings, part I The Fellowship of the Ring, with the text of the Elvish song Galadriel’s Lament. Photo credit: Zanastardust, Wiki Commons, CC BY 2.0.  
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TONY KEEN

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## Legolas in Troy

### The influence of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies on cinematic portrayals of ancient Greece and Rome

**Abstract** The Lord of the Rings movies were a cinematic phenomenon, extremely popular. They are not often considered as works of Classical Reception. These films' influence on subsequent ancient world movies has been understudied, and undervalued. A common model of cinematic Greece and Rome in the twenty-first century looks solely back to *Gladiator*. Undoubtedly *Gladiator*, and its commercial success, is important to how ancient world movies developed; but focussing solely on *Gladiator* does not explain a move away from Roman history towards Greek mythology, culminating in a flurry of movies about Greek mythological heroes. *Lord of the Rings* is an overlooked factor. Already in *Troy* two LOTR stars are in key roles, and the battle scenes seek to imitate those of Jackson's trilogy. 300 mythologizes far beyond Frank Miller's graphic novel, adding several monsters; LOTR's influence is at play here. LOTR's influence was one factor in a complex process that saw ancient world movies change in the twenty-first century. LOTR fed into an atmosphere that moved ancient world movies towards Greece, away from Rome, through promoting the appeal of a combination of epic and the fantastic.

**Keywords** Classical movies, *Lord of the Rings*, Classical reception, Peter Jackson, fantasy movies

## INTRODUCTION

Though his academic career was mainly in English literature, particularly that of the medieval period, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was, like all middle and upper-class Englishmen of his generation, steeped in the languages and history of ancient Greece and Rome. Indeed, he began his university career reading Classics, only switching to English Language and Literature after two years of study.<sup>1</sup> Nor did this mark the end of Tolkien's Classical scholarship; he published a note on the Romano-British deity Nodens in 1932.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore inevitable that there is a strong Classical influence in his writings on Middle-Earth.<sup>3</sup> It would not be surprising if this influence then pervaded the movies drawn from his work, in particular the phenomenally successful trilogy directed by Peter Jackson, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003). Whilst it is not the main thrust of this article to consider the movies as instances of Classical reception, it is necessary to briefly discuss the point.

Whilst these movies are evidently epics,<sup>4</sup> little has been written on Classical influences in these movies.<sup>5</sup> The movies are only mentioned briefly in Hamish

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1 This article draws upon a number of previous publications: Keen (2013), (2014a), (2014b), (2014c), and (2015). I am grateful to several respondents, especially Joanna Paul, for encouraging me to take this further, and to the editors of this issue of *Thersites* and the anonymous reviewers. Some of the points made here are anticipated in Paul (2010). The piece follows, with some inconsistency, the practice of using 'movie' rather than 'film' for the distinct texts experienced, either in the cinema or through home entertainment; see Maltby (2003) 7. For the details of Tolkien's career and his early experience of the Greek and Roman worlds, see Carpenter (2002), esp. 60 on Tolkien's switch to English, and Williams (2021c). See also Cristini and Oughton in this volume.

2 Tolkien (1932).

3 The starting points for investigating this are, of course, now Arduini, Canzonieri & Testi (2019), and Williams (2021a). See also the other articles in this volume, in particular, Cristini.

4 The *Lord of the Rings* movies are firmly placed in the epic tradition in Elliott (2014a): see within that work, Elliott (2014b) 1; Sturtevant (2014) 110, 112, 117–119; Bridge (2014) 189.

5 There are fleeting references in Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 37, 125, Paul (2013) 19, 227 n. 58, Pomeroy (2017) (in Radford (2017) 124, and Margolis (2017) 404), and Augoustakis & Raucci (2018) (in Toscano (2018) 114). There are no mentions in Richards (2008), or Winkler (2009) or (2017).

Williams' introduction to his edited collection *Tolkien and the Classical World*. When Williams does mention them, it is to argue that Jackson suppresses a Classically-influenced version of Middle-earth in favour of a 'quasi-medieval or Gothic' version.<sup>6</sup> This is true, and, as Williams notes, this is hardly an unjustified reading of Tolkien's work.

Nevertheless, there are examples of Classical influences in the movies. For one, Gondor as visualized by Peter Jackson seems to me to be drawing on the visual aesthetic of the Byzantine empire, especially when the armoured knights of Gondor are compared with the *kataphractoi* of the late Byzantine period. This is not surprising; there is much of the Byzantine/Eastern Roman empire in Tolkien's Gondor, as Tolkien himself hinted at (*Letters* 157) and as Juliette Harrisson notes.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the ruins of Gondor outside Minas Tirith are, in Tolkien's text, evocative of the Roman ruins left in Britain, again as Harrisson says.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the same Romano-British atmosphere is evoked by these Gondorian ruins when they are presented on screen (an example is the depiction of the ruins on top of Amon Hen, where Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli fight orcs as the Fellowship of the Ring is broken).

I suspect that these echoes of the ancient world are overlooked because they are too easily dismissed as being really medieval. There are medieval ruins in Britain, just as there are Roman ones, and so the ruins of Gondor can be seen as looking as much like medieval ruins as like Roman ones. And whilst there is clearly a connection between Byzantium and Rome, it is often played down in modern scholarship; hence, a connection between Tolkien and Rome *via* Byzantium can be overlooked.<sup>9</sup>

However, a full consideration of these movies as works of Classical Reception in their own right is a topic which lies outside the scope of the present article. Instead, I want to look at their influence on subsequent cinematic portrayals of ancient Greece and Rome. This is something that I believe has been understudied, and the full significance of Jackson's movies in this context is not always

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6 Williams (2021b) xix–xx.

7 Harrisson (2021) 336–337; see also Librán Moreno (2011) and (2013) and also Praet in this volume on the throne room of Gondor and its models.

8 Harrisson (2021) 339.

9 Cf. Williams (2021b) xiii–xiv, who offers both the end of the Western Roman empire in 476 and the end of the Eastern empire in 1453 as the ends of the Classical timeline.

recognised.<sup>10</sup> My argument is that the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy fed into an atmosphere that moved the ancient world movie<sup>11</sup> away from Rome and towards Greece, through promoting the appeal of a combination of epic and the fantastic. This becomes clearer if, as I shall argue later, Greek and Roman epics are seen as a subgenre within the wider phenomenon of the pre-modern epic.

### THE *GLADIATOR* EFFECT?

It is necessary, first, to construct a more sophisticated model of how the ancient world movie developed in the twenty-first century. Following in the wake of the massive commercial success of *Fellowship of the Ring*'s near contemporary, *Gladiator* (2000), the early twenty-first century is often, and not unreasonably, seen as a new golden age for movies set in the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome, one that bears comparison with the height of the epic in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, there is a shortage of coherent models and theorized approaches to movies of this genre and period,<sup>12</sup> in comparison with those available for examples made in the twentieth century. In comparison, those examples of the ancient world movie made in the twentieth century have been much studied and

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**10** I have addressed these issues before, in Keen (2015). However, I have subsequently revised my views to properly take into account both the shape of developments in twenty-first century Classics cinema and the influence of the superhero movie on the wave of Greek mythology movies in 2010–2014.

**11** I use this term here for movies set in ancient Greece or Rome, to the exclusion of other ancient world settings. I am, of course, aware that it is not entirely accurate, since there are movies set in other ancient worlds, such as the Ancient Near East, India, Biblical Lands, etc., but this is the best term I have been able to come up with. As I argue below, I think that this categorization means a lot more to Classical Reception scholars than it does to anyone else. I will not consider movies set outside Greece and Rome to any great degree in this article, with the exception of *The Lord of the Rings* movies themselves.

**12** The most sustained attempt is Elliott (2014a), which notably comes at the issue from a film studies perspective rather than a Classical Reception approach. Paul (2010) largely addresses scholarly publications up to 2010, rather than actual movies.

theorized.<sup>13</sup> This is in some ways understandable. Many of the current general survey volumes were written in the decade 2000–2010,<sup>14</sup> and it was too soon for their authors to take much of a view on what was happening around them. Consequently, a number of these works end with *Gladiator*, even where it is noted as a potential new start.<sup>15</sup> More recent texts, such as those in Edinburgh University Press' *Screening Antiquity* series, tend to take a narrower focus and do not engage much with a wider theory of the ancient world movie in the twenty-first century. A good general study of movies of Greece and Rome in the twenty-first century is currently lacking and is much to be desired.<sup>16</sup>

On those occasions when the post-*Gladiator* boom is discussed, a common model is often encountered. That model goes as follows: after failure of *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), no-one was much interested in making ancient world epic movies in Hollywood. This did not change until CGI had developed to the point where the spectacle of Greece and Rome, on which Hollywood epics had depended for much of their appeal, could be recreated without using physical sets. Along came *Gladiator* in 2000, demonstrating that there was a market for ancient world movies. After that, the model goes, the production of ancient world movies has continued apace, with examples such as *Troy* (2004), *300* (2006), *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and *Pompeii* (2014); the momentum seemingly never dissipates.<sup>17</sup> This is a nice, simple model. But I believe it is too simple.

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13 A full list of such discussions would be almost as long as this article, but key texts include Wyke (1997), Solomon (2001), Cyrino (2005), Nisbet (2008), Richards (2008), Winkler (2009), Theodorakopoulos (2009), Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011), Paul (2013), Pomeroy (2017), and Winkler (2017).

14 See Paul (2010) 137 & n. 2, on 2001 as a 'pivotal year for establishing "Classics and film" scholarship'.

15 For *Gladiator* as a new start, see e.g. Theodorakopoulos (2010) 96–121 and Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 216–234. Compare also Cyrino (2005). Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 235–237 give brief consideration to post-2000 movies.

16 Carl Buckland is currently working on *The Classical World on Film in the 21st Century* (see under the "Research" tab at <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/humanities/departments/classics-and-archaeology/people/carl.buckland>, accessed 4 July 2022), and I hope to address this topic myself at some point in the future.

17 Emphasis on the role of *Gladiator* can be seen, for instance, in Winkler (2007b) 4 & n. 12. Elliott (2014a) has a still from *Gladiator* on the cover, and note also the reference to 'the post-

To treat all post-2000 ancient world movies as part of a generic post-*Gladiator* boom risks missing out on subtle differences between the movies. For a start, there has not been a simple, steady linear progression of Greek and Roman movies in the last twenty-two years. Instead, there has been a series of mini-waves in various sub-genres. The post-*Gladiator* boom in epics effectively fizzled out after 2004 and the release in that year of *Alexander*, *Troy* and *King Arthur*. *300* in 2006 was less a follow-on from *Gladiator* than the next in a series of movies based on graphic novels, with predecessors such as *Road to Perdition* (2002), *V For Vendetta* (2005) and *Sin City* (2005). From 2010 to 2014 there was a wave of Greek mythological hero movies; *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and its sequel *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), two Percy Jackson movies (2010 and 2013), *Immortals* (2011), and *The Legend of Hercules* and *Hercules* (both 2014) being the main examples (this wave will be discussed further on in this article).

2014 to 2018 saw a wave of new Biblical epics (a genre that is closely related to and intertwined with the Roman epic). Mel Gibson had tried and failed to revive this genre with *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), but the later wave can clearly be seen in movies such as *Noah* (2014), *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), *Risen* (2016), *The Young Messiah* (2016), *Ben-Hur* (2016), and *Mary Magdalene* (2018) – with the 1950s epic pastiche sections of the Coen brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) perhaps to be seen, at least in part, as an ironic commentary upon this wave.<sup>18</sup> The poor critical and financial performance of *Ben-Hur* was a key factor in killing this wave off.

All through this period there were also individual movies that do not fit easily into these waves, such as *Agora* (2009), *Mr. Peabody and Sherman* (2014), a children's animation that is replete with Classical references, and *Horrible Histories*:

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*Gladiator* historical epics' in the subtitle of Jancovich (2014). Note also this from a 2021 call for papers (<https://antiquityinmediastudies.wordpress.com/2021/11/29/cfp-aims-special-issue-of-journal-of-popular-film-television/>, accessed 4 July 2022): 'the prestige and popularity of 2000's *Gladiator* spearheaded a resurgence of the historic ancient world in the epic mode'.

**18** I am not convinced by the argument, suggested by McAuley (2016), that *The Passion of the Christ* began this later wave. A full decade elapsed between that movie and *Noah*, and that is, for me, too long to group them together. It took more mainstream Hollywood presences than Gibson – and whilst it seems odd talking about Darren Aronofsky in those terms, I think this has been true since *Black Swan* (2010) – to get the Biblical movie going again. Quite why this happened I am not entirely sure. But I do not think that it was a direct response to Gibson's movie.



*The Movie – Rotten Romans* (2019). However, of those, only *Mr. Peabody* is a true Hollywood product.

The other issue with the standard post-*Gladiator* model is that it fails to provide an explanation for one interesting, and perhaps slightly odd, phenomenon of post-*Gladiator* ancient world movies: the relative dearth of Roman settings, as opposed to Greek ones.<sup>19</sup> Many of the big ancient world movies that followed *Gladiator* have Greek settings: *Alexander*, *Troy*, *300*, *Clash of the Titans*, the two Percy Jackson movies, *Immortals*, *Wrath of the Titans*, *The Legend of Hercules*, *Hercules*, and *300: Rise of an Empire*. This is especially noteworthy in comparison with movies made in the 1950s and 1960s, where Greek settings were rarer than Roman ones.<sup>20</sup> There were Greek Hollywood epics in the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Alexander the Great* (1956), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *The 300 Spartans* (1962), or *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), but these were outnumbered by, and had less commercial success and cultural impact than, movies dealing with Roman materials.<sup>21</sup> The first ancient world movies that people think of when considering this period of Hollywood history are the Roman ones.

Partly, this was for reasons discussed by Gideon Nisbet: primarily a difficulty in coding Greece as notably different from Rome, a sense that Greece is boring, and an inability to escape notions of camp.<sup>22</sup> However, this was also partly because Greek materials were less easy to rework with a Biblical angle, and much of ancient epic in the 1950s was essentially Biblical epic, either directly or indirectly. Many movies dealt with events in the Bible, examples being *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *King of Kings* (1961) or fictional tales of early Christianity, examples being *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *The Robe* (1953). This extended even to movies of Rome before the Christian era, such as *Spartacus* (1960), and ostensibly non-Biblical movies such as *The Egyptian* (1954); in each of those examples, a main character, Spartacus and the pharaoh Akhenaten respectively, stands in as a substitute Christ figure.

The simple post-*Gladiator* model, if accurate, ought to have meant that a number of Roman-set movies followed directly on from *Gladiator*, in the tradi-

19 As noted by Paul (2010) 142 and Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 220.

20 See Nisbet (2008) 7–9; Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 39 and 101.

21 I count a movie such as *Cleopatra* (1963) as essentially Roman rather than Greek. The pattern is, of course, reversed in the Italian *peplum* movie, where Greek heroes such as Hercules, Theseus, and Atlas predominated, though Roman movies also were made.

22 Nisbet (2008), *passim*.

tion of the Hollywood historical Roman epics of the 1950s and 1960s. In reality, such movies, the sort of movies that *Gladiator* was imitating, the likes of *The Robe* (1953), *Spartacus* (1960), or *Gladiator*'s model, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), are notably absent from the post-2000 cinema screen. Sixteen years passed between *Gladiator* and what would appear to be a movie firmly in the Roman epic tradition that *Gladiator* supposedly revived. That movie is the 2016 remake of *Ben-Hur*. However, I have already argued that this movie, with its heavy emphasis on religion, was part of a mini-revival of the Biblical epic, rather than simply a post-*Gladiator* project.

There are Roman-set movies such as Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, but that is a movie that I consider very much *sui generis* and outside the Hollywood system. It was an attempt to ride the coat-tails of *Gladiator* to restart the Biblical genre but one which failed, partly because the commercial and critical failure of *Alexander* (2004) and the critical failure of *Troy* (2004) came close to killing off entirely the post-*Gladiator* ancient epic.<sup>23</sup> There is also *Agora* (2009), but that emerges from a European tradition, rather than Hollywood, and is not really 'epic'. There is *Pompeii* (2014), but, as I shall argue later, this belongs as much to the tradition of fantasy movies as to the post-*Gladiator* tradition. And there are four Hadrian's Wall movies: *King Arthur* (2004), *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion* (2010), and *The Eagle* (2011). Though these are clearly influenced by *Gladiator* in some aspects, they are not full-on Roman epics in the *Gladiator* style but more concerned with the circumscribed setting of Roman Britain than the full imperial stage on which the great epics of the 1950s and 1960s were played out.

The sort of Roman empire stories that used to be staples of 1950s Hollywood epic instead transferred to television. Since 2000 audiences have seen HBO's *Rome* (2005–2007), which recycles the material of the Richard Burton/Elizabeth Taylor *Cleopatra* (1963), amongst other sources; the various STARZ *Spartacus* series (2010–2013); and mini-series such as *Julius Caesar* (also known as *Caesar*, 2002), *Imperium: Augustus* (2003), *Spartacus* (2004), based on Howard Fast's novel, *Empire* (2005), and *Ben-Hur* (2010).<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that two of these mini-series, *Spartacus* and *Ben-Hur*, were based on novels that in the 1950s and

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23 See Nisbet (2008) 67.

24 The 2002 *Julius Caesar* and 2004 *Spartacus* are sometimes presented as single TV movies, but each was originally a two-episode mini-series.

1960s had given rise to movies. The small screen now seems to be often viewed as a more appropriate venue for these sorts of stories.<sup>25</sup>

It is not my intention to suggest that *Gladiator* is not an important factor in shaping the ancient world movie in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Its influence is obvious in movies such as *Pompeii* (2014) and *The Legend of Hercules* (2014), both of which have substantial sections in which they are trying to be *Gladiator*. But it is simplistic to see all the post-2000 ancient world movies as solely direct consequences of *Gladiator*'s success.

### THE LORD OF THE RINGS EFFECT

So what factors are behind the increased predominance of Greek subjects in the ancient world movies of the twenty-first century? There is a complex set of ideas at work here. One, suggested by Blanshard & Shahabudin, is that Greek settings were thought to resonate better with political concerns of the twenty-first century, offering more complex and less clear-cut issues than the tyranny of the Roman empire.<sup>26</sup> But even they admit that such moral complexity can be off-putting to an audience, and indeed the rise of the superhero movie has demonstrated the appeal of the less complex setting. Hence, I do not consider this to be a major factor.

An underappreciated element is the influence of Sam Raimi and Robert Tapert's two television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001). The latter of these series was still being produced at the time of *Gladiator*, and the former had only just finished. Many of the crew of *Hercules* and *Xena* would go on to work on *Lord of the Rings*, and the trilogy was also filmed in New Zealand. As Jon Solomon has recently argued, the success of these series, and that of Disney's *Hercules* (1997), helped pave the way for the general revival of the ancient world on screen of the early twenty-

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, television has dealt with lengthy historical narratives of this sort long before 2000; examples include *The Caesars* (1968), *I, Claudius* (1976), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), and *A.D.* (1985). Nor should it be thought that Greek mythology is not treated on television in the twenty-first century; note the TV miniseries *Hercules* (2002).

<sup>26</sup> So Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 220.

first century.<sup>27</sup> This meant that an audience had been created that was already predisposed more in the direction of Greek mythology than of Roman history.<sup>28</sup> It is true, as Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones notes, that Roman history was already generally presented in Hollywood epic in a mythologized fashion; but in that case, it was mythologized through presentation in a series of heroic narratives. The mythology of Greek-set movies included a large element of the fantastic that was not as noticeable in Roman epic, though, as I discuss later, that element certainly was there.

The third factor, I believe, is *The Lord of the Rings*. I would argue that this has been neglected because the generic similarities between *Lord of the Rings* and ancient world movies are not given the emphasis they deserve. Classical Reception scholars will tend to draw quite firm lines between movies with Greek and Roman settings and those with medieval settings. But Hollywood audiences and producers probably draw less firm lines between the ancient and medieval periods than Classicists do.<sup>29</sup> Film critics have often defined the 'historical epic' as relating to settings before the late medieval period, with Derek Elley placing the boundary at the end of the eleventh century and Gary Smith making the thirteenth century the boundary.<sup>30</sup>

There is perhaps a stronger case for making a division between the modern and the pre-modern. Hegel and Marx (each writing before the invention of cinema) both believed that epic could not exist in a modern setting, Hegel expressing this in *Aesthetics* and Marx in *Grundrisse*.<sup>31</sup> Joanna Paul has strongly argued that the notion that 'epic' and 'modern' are incompatible is a false one,<sup>32</sup> and I myself am very happy to accept quite a wide definition of what an epic might be.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, such a perception as is expressed by Hegel and Marx may perhaps be widespread in how many people think of movies and other cul-

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27 Solomon (2021). This was combined with serial repetition on television of Hollywood epics of the 1950s and 1960s; Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 218–219.

28 Llewellyn-Jones (2009) 569.

29 The following discussion owes much to Paul (2013) 13–15.

30 Elley (1984) 12; Smith (1991) xv.

31 Available in Marx (1973) 111; Hegel (1975).

32 Paul (2013) 14–15, and 175–212.

33 As is Paul (2013) 12–23; cf. Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 36–40.

ture. From this, one may postulate that those outside the field of Classics perceive a more distinct difference between the modern and the pre-modern than they do between the medieval and the ancient or between the Greco-Roman and other forms of antiquity. I do not mean to say that Hollywood producers and audiences do not at all see any divisions between the Greco-Roman and the non-Greco-Roman world, because I do think they see Greek and Roman movies as something of a genre of their own. But I do want to argue that they do not see these divisions in quite the same way as Classicists do. Greek and Roman epics, I believe, can be seen as a subgenre within the wider phenomenon of the pre-modern epic. This was true in the 1950s and 1960s, when Roman epics operated within the wider context of the Biblical epic. I myself have made a case for considering Ray Harryhausen's *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Clash of the Titans* (1981) alongside his three Sinbad movies.<sup>34</sup>

This blurring of lines between the ancient and the medieval remains true now. This should not be a surprise. Gideon Nisbet has made the point that movies are often unable to draw a clear distinction between Greece and Rome,<sup>35</sup> and this can still be seen, for instance, in the adoption of the Roman *testudo* formation of interlocking shields by Greek troops in *Troy*, *300*, and (explicitly named as such) *The Legend of Hercules*. If no clear distinction is being drawn between Greece and Rome, why should we expect one between the ancient and medieval worlds?

So, whilst I am not aware of anyone formally saying that an ancient world movie was greenlit because of *Lord of the Rings*, I think that, when movies set in ancient Greece or Rome are greenlit, the studio bosses are thinking as much of the success of *The Lord of the Rings* as they are of that of *Gladiator*. *The Lord of the Rings* showed that adding magic, monsters, and fantasy to the mix could be a ticket to financial success. Therefore, those inclined to make cinematic epics with a pre-modern setting in the later 2000s were looking for other stories with magic or monsters. And that pushed people in the direction of Greece.

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34 Keen (2013). The Sinbad movies are *The 7<sup>th</sup> Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973), and *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (1977).

35 Nisbet (2008) *passim*. See in particular Nisbet (2008) 8 on the difficulty in making Greece distinct, and 79–82 on *Troy* as a Greek movie made faux-Roman; but the argument is sustained throughout his book.

At a conference on Classics in children's literature that took place in 2009,<sup>36</sup> it was observed that authors in this field tend to turn to Rome when they want historical stories but to Greece when they want mythology. This, of course, conceals the degree to which what is thought of as 'Greek myth' is actually dependent upon Roman sources such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but this is not, I believe, an issue to which the media in general pays much attention. Here we are concerned with general impressions, it often being assumed, wrongly as it happens, that Roman mythology is no more than Greek mythology with different names for the gods.<sup>37</sup> I myself have observed in print that that this selection of Rome for history and Greece for myth can be seen in *Doctor Who* in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>38</sup> This selection of Rome for history and Greece for myth is also apparent in ancient world movies.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, the fantastic had long been present in ancient world movies. Movies based upon Greek mythology naturally featured gods and monsters, whilst miracles were often featured in Biblical movies. Even an apparently historical and secular movie such as *Cleopatra* (1963) includes magic, as Cleopatra watches the assassination of Julius Caesar through a vision conjured up in a fire.<sup>40</sup> The success of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy pushed ancient world cinema more in the direction of the fantastic. By doing so, it probably helped the ancient world movie to survive the perceived critical and commercial failure of *Alexander*.

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36 'Asterisks and Obelisks: Classical Receptions in Children's Literature', University of Wales, Lampeter, 6–10 July 2009. A selection of contributions is now published as Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018a).

37 Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018b) 32 n. 7, note that this fact complicates the division between 'Greek myth' and 'Roman history'.

38 Keen (2010).

39 Sadly, whilst everyone working on reception in popular culture is aware of the selection of Rome for history and Greece for myth, there is, as far as I am aware, no definitive theorized academic article that focusses on it. It is addressed a little in Maurice (2015) 1 and Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018b) 32 n. 7.

40 The depiction of the fantastic in relation to the divine is discussed in Maurice (2019).

## TROY

The first movie to show the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* is *Troy* (2004). In some ways this is a very traditional epic treatment of the Trojan War, following a standard pattern of historicizing the material and removing the gods from the narrative, a pattern seen in the 1956 *Helen of Troy*.<sup>41</sup> A lot of the impetus for *Troy* being greenlit certainly must have come from *Gladiator*, to which it makes frequent reference.<sup>42</sup> Clearly the trope of removal of all elements of fantasy from the Trojan War, and its treatment as historical fiction, was stronger in this instance than the permission *Lord of the Rings* gave for the inclusion of fantastical elements.

Nevertheless, there are strong influences from *Lord of the Rings* on *Troy*. In Martin Winkler's second book on *Troy*, *Return to Troy: New Essays on the Hollywood Epic*, Antonio Martín-Rodríguez spends a couple of pages of his chapter looking at the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* on *Troy*.<sup>43</sup> Considering *The Lord of the Rings* as an 'unconscious' entry in the Classical tradition,<sup>44</sup> Martín-Rodríguez identifies a number of aspects of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy's influence on *Troy*. He rightly notes that Orlando Bloom, Paris in *Troy*, had previously been Legolas in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it seems doubtful that Bloom would have come to the attention of the casting director of *Troy* were it not for *The Lord of the Rings*. It seems hardly coincidental that Bloom's role in both *Lord of the Rings* and *Troy* is as an accomplished archer. In an interview with Petersen in the same volume, Winkler rightly raises the expectations of Bloom as a heroic figure that the audience would bring with them and how those would not wholly be met by his Paris (though ultimately Bloom's Paris is a heroic figure of sorts).<sup>45</sup> The casting of Sean Bean, who had been Boromir in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and plays

41 I briefly discuss tropes of modern versions of the Trojan War in Keen (2021), which will form the basis of a future detailed study. *Troy* ticks all of these tropes off.

42 See the quotes from Petersen in Russell (2004).

43 Martín-Rodríguez (2015) 221–222. There are only three references to *The Lord of the Rings* in Winkler's *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic* (2007a), and all three use Jackson's series as comparative material, rather than examining its direct influence upon *Troy*. The mentions are Winkler (2007b) 9, Solomon (2007) 93–94, and Cyrino (2007) 141.

44 Martín-Rodríguez (2015) 205. Blondell (2016) criticises the use of this term, but it does not matter for my argument.

45 Winkler (2015b) 21.

Odysseus here, may also have been shaped by Jackson's fantasy epic, though Bean had played leading roles before, such as in *GoldenEye* (1995).<sup>46</sup>

Martín-Rodríguez may be on less firm ground when he suggests that Eric Bana's Hector in *Troy* is modelled on Viggo Mortensen's Aragorn, as it is hard to argue that there is anything in Bana's Hector that is not just the quality of a generic hero. But the battle scenes in *Troy* are clearly imitative of those in *Lord of the Rings*, particularly the Battle of Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers*. In both, the audience are shown wide aerial pans of CGI armies, each soldier moving individually; both *Troy* and *The Two Towers* feature an assault upon a defended wall.

## HELICOPTER SHOTS AND HADRIAN'S WALL

One of the features of Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* is aerial footage, taken from helicopters, showing parties of characters striding across the landscape. These are particularly prevalent in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, such as a shot of the Fellowship attempting to cross the snowy ridges of Caradhras, are also used in *The Two Towers*, and then are much less found in *The Return of the King*; they then come back in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012). These show off the New Zealand landscapes particularly well.

Similar helicopter shots of small groups of people crossing mountainous and often snow-covered wastelands turn up in four movies set largely or wholly in Roman Britain. In *King Arthur* (2004), Arthur and his Sarmatian knights have rescued a group of refugees from a villa improbably located north of Hadrian's Wall; all are seen heading along a snow-filled valley and a frozen lake, with mountains to either side.<sup>47</sup> In *The Last Legion* (2007), a party of Roman heroes are seen climbing snow-clad mountains (presumably intended to be the Alps) on their way from Italy into Gaul and eventually to Britain. In *Centurion* (2010), a party of Roman soldiers trapped in Scotland are seen running across snowy ridges. In *The Eagle* (2011), a crane seems to substitute for a helicopter as camera

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<sup>46</sup> Audiences familiar with the idea that Bean tends to die in all his movies – see Fowler (2014) – might be surprised by his survival in *Troy*, but the idea had not taken as firm root in 2004 as it did later.

<sup>47</sup> The sequence with the frozen lake also makes reference to the Battle on the Ice, as depicted in Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938).



platform, but the principle, of looking from a height at our central characters as they look out over the mountains of Scotland, is the same.<sup>48</sup> These four movies seem to be using these shots to deliberately place themselves in a tradition that audiences will recognise from *Lord of the Rings*, and perhaps hope to intensify the audience's empathy with the main characters. At the same time, all four movies, and *Lord of the Rings*, show how their central characters are dwarfed by the landscapes in which they find themselves, which are, it is implied, outside civilization. (In all the Roman examples except *The Last Legion*, the landscapes through which the figures are seen travelling are beyond Hadrian's Wall; in *The Last Legion*, as noted, the party are crossing the Alps.)

There is a similarity between the musical soundtracks of all these movies and *The Lord of the Rings*. All feature a certain degree of Celtic-style non-verbal singing. This may well be influenced by Howard Shore's score for Jackson's movies (perhaps ultimately drawing from *Xena: Warrior Princess* via Jackson's movies). However, these also need to be seen in the overall context of scores for epic movies in the twenty-first century. In particular, Hans Zimmer's score for *King Arthur* owes more to the same composer's music for *Gladiator*, and *Gladiator* is also presumably a touchstone for Patrick Doyle on *The Last Legion*, Ilan Eshkeri on *Centurion*, and Atli Övarsson on *The Eagle*, though each composer brings something of their own to each score.

Further influences in these movies can be traced back to *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, *Centurion* opens with helicopter shots of mountains, much as *The Two Towers* does. What all these elements show are the new tropes for epic that *Lord of the Rings* established.

Also, though these movies are Roman-set and so should be inclined towards being historical, there is something mythological about all of them. In two of them, the mythology is the Matter of Britain and the Arthurian legends, rather than Greek or Roman mythology. *King Arthur* and *The Last Legion* present themselves as historical movies of the end of Roman Britain, but both draw upon mythological material from the Arthurian cycle. *The Last Legion*, in particular, codes much of its action as a fantastic quest, with legendary swords and Ben Kingsley's Ambrosinus (who turns out to be Merlin) being very much in the mould of Obi-Wan Kenobi from the space fantasy *Star Wars* series. He never actually performs any magic, but the movie wants the viewer to believe that he is always on the verge of doing so. *Centurion* and *The Eagle* are more realistic

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48 *Ben-Hur* (2016) also includes a brief sequence of battle on a snow-covered mountaintop.

movies, but these are dealing with a modern myth of the Roman empire. This is the supposed disappearance of the Ninth Legion in Scotland, a thesis advanced by Theodor Mommsen, and dramatised and popularised by Rosemary Sutcliff in her children's novel *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954). There is precious little actual evidence for the hypothesis, though it is still supported by some scholars.<sup>49</sup> One might argue that this is using myth in a different fashion, but nevertheless, there is a slight deviation from the purely historical.

Subsequent Roman productions show a similar tilt towards the fantastic. Nothing actually fantastical happens in *Pompeii* (2014), but it codes towards fantasy. This is shown by its use of fantastical effects, much in the way as *Titanic* (1997) was coded towards science fiction through its effects and its director, James Cameron, otherwise known for science fiction movies such as *The Terminator* (1984) and *Aliens* (1986). *Pompeii* casts in its lead role Kit Harrington, who had made his name in epic fantasy television series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019). One might argue that this is simply cashing in on the actor's popularity, but every star brings with them audience expectations formed on the basis of their previous roles.<sup>50</sup> It is not unreasonable to suggest, therefore, that the casting of Harrington codes the movie, if not directly towards *The Lord of the Rings*, then towards the fantastical *Zeitgeist* in ancient world movies that *The Lord of the Rings* has helped bring about.<sup>51</sup>

Such a trend is further developed in *Britannia* (2018–2022), a series about the Roman invasion of Britain that was part co-created by Jez and Tom Butterworth, who had co-written *The Last Legion*. *Britannia* involves a strong element of the fantastic, through the magical powers of the Druids.<sup>52</sup> This intensified focus on the fantastic can also be found in movies set outside Greece and Rome; Darren Aronofsky's version of *Noah* (2014) presents the angels as fantastical alien beings and owes much to the post-apocalyptic dystopian science fiction movie.

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49 E.g. Russell (2010) 180–185. On the historicity of the disappearance of the Ninth Legion, see now Elliott 2021, who handles the evidence evenly and fairly.

50 For the principle, see Butler (1998), and for an example of this functioning in the ancient world movie, see Cyrino (2018).

51 On other aspects of *Pompeii*, see Joanna Paul's excellent article (2019).

52 Such a portrayal of magical Druids is also to be found in *Boudica*, aka *Warrior Queen* (2003). On the fantastic in *Britannia*, see Harrison (2018). I hope to address both *Britannia* and *Boudica* as part of a future project on Roman Britain on screen.

## 300

It has long been recognised that *300* is heavily influenced by *The Lord of the Rings*, as shown, for instance, by Susanne Turner.<sup>53</sup> Frank Miller's original comic (1998) had already, overtly and deliberately, mythologized the story of Spartan King Leonidas' last stand against the Persian invasion of Greece. The movie takes that process considerably further. The Persian Immortals in the movie wear the Japanese ninja masks that Miller anachronistically gives them in the graphic novel; but underneath, they are deformed; Miller does not make them like this at all. In their deformity, the Immortals of *300* echo the Orcs of Jackson's epics.<sup>54</sup> And like the Orcs in Jackson's movies (and, to be fair, the Orcs in Tolkien),<sup>55</sup> all the Persians are dehumanized, othered, and treated as sword fodder for the heroes and their allies. Of course, plenty of movies other the enemy, but *300* also includes an 'Uber Immortal', a near-mindless character not to be found in the comic and which is strongly reminiscent of *Fellowship's* cave troll. The elephants of Xerxes' army are something that is to be found in Miller's comic, but one suspects there is an element of influence from the Mûmakil of *The Return of the King*. The same might be said for the armoured rhinos ridden into battle by Persians, which are an invention of the movie.

And then there is Xerxes. Miller's Xerxes is a king worshipped as a god, festooned with jewellery, but ultimately mortal. The movie makes him something more, impossibly tall, with an impossibly deep voice. His temptation of Leonidas takes on supernatural elements, and it is hard not to draw parallels between Xerxes and Sauron; both appear as mythological embodiments of evil. Both are otherworldly, no longer human, and demand (and receive) total obedience from their followers.

The positioning of Xerxes in the world of the fantastic is even more emphasized in the sequel, *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), where the human Xerxes wanders the desert, finds a mysterious hermit's cave, and dips himself into a pool imbued with power that is 'evil and perverse', before emerging as the re-born god. However, fantastical elements are then somewhat played down as the focus of the action shifts to Artemisia and her naval battle, with Xerxes and his

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53 Turner (2009) 129.

54 Again, see Turner (2009) 129.

55 Obertino (2006) 119.

army, still including elephants, playing a smaller role in this movie than in the previous one.

## GREEK SUPERHEROES

Between 2010 and 2014, there was another cinematic wave, this time of heroic mythological narratives, centring around three figures from Greek myth, Perseus, Theseus, and Hercules: *Clash of the Titans* (2010); *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010), *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), and *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (2013), work with the Perseus myth, *Immortals* (2011) depicts Theseus, and Hercules is represented in *The Legend of Hercules* (2014) and *Hercules* (2014).<sup>56</sup> The Asylum, a company famous for making low-budget 'schlock' movies, contributed to the movement with *Hercules Reborn* (2014). At the same time, other ancient world movies appeared that are tangential to this wave, such as *300: Rise of an Empire* and *Pompeii*. There are a number of reasons why such a type of movie suddenly became popular.

There was still a residual *Gladiator* effect, seen to its greatest in *The Legend of Hercules*, which includes an amphitheatre sequence that clearly owes a lot to Ridley Scott's epic. In contrast, the inspiration behind the two *Percy Jackson* movies was not so much *Gladiator* as the desire to find a new children's fantasy franchise to take the place of the *Harry Potter* series, then coming to its end.<sup>57</sup> (Hence the director of the first *Percy Jackson* movie, Chris Columbus, was the same man who had directed the first two *Harry Potter* movies and produced the third.)

The rise of the superhero movie was also a factor. The *X-Men* movies had begun in 2000, Warner Brothers had revived the Batman franchise in 2005 with *Batman Begins*, and 2008 saw the debut of the Marvel Cinematic Universe with *Iron Man*. The fourth MCU movie, *Thor* (2011), would be particularly influential upon later entrants into the Greek hero wave, especially *The Legend of Hercules*. In the final scenes of that movie, Hercules is able to call upon the divine powers of his

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<sup>56</sup> Many of the movies of this wave are discussed in Augoustakis & Raucci (2018), and Salzmann-Mitchell & Alvares (2018) 97–180.

<sup>57</sup> As rightly pointed out by Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 219–220.

sky-god father, and wield lightning. The interests of the MCU in Norse mythology also left room for a superhero-influenced approach to Greek mythology; it is notable that the DC Expanded Universe's Greek myth influenced movies, *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Aquaman* (2018), and *Shazam!* (2019), appeared after this wave of Greek myth movies had exhausted itself.

Clearly another factor was the success of *300*. This highly mythologized version of Greek history did not result in any more Greek history movies, with the exception of *Rise of an Empire*. Instead, it begat more Greek mythology movies. Since we have established the clear influence of *The Lord of the Rings* upon *300*, it is fair to say that this wave of Greek hero movies has been produced under the influence, at one remove, of *The Lord of the Rings*.

## HERE COMES THE THEORY

So what advice can be drawn from this study for those working on Classical reception in cinema? Part of the reason why *The Lord of the Rings*' influence is not properly discussed is, of course, that some people are aware of it, but that it is not their particular subject at any one time.<sup>58</sup> However, there is also a disciplinary issue.

Though the best scholars on Classical Reception in cinema, such as Martin Winkler or Maria Wyke, are knowledgeable in a wide range of genres, many, perhaps understandably, limit their scholarly interests to those movies set in, or directly referencing, the ancient Greco-Roman world. There is a danger that this approach, and indeed Classical Reception theory in general, can become intrinsically very inward-looking, in a way that I think is not helpful.<sup>59</sup> This is compounded by the fact that most people working on cinematic representations of Greece and Rome are Classicists or Ancient Historians. There are not too many people working on depictions of antiquity from film studies scholarship, James Russell, Robert Burgoyne, and Jeffrey Richards being notable excep-

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<sup>58</sup> So, for instance, this is only the second time I have addressed the series' influence in citable form (the other being Keen 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Paul (2010) 138: "Too often, reception studies – including cinematic ones – are in danger of paying insufficient attention to the full range of contexts that inform the reception."

tions.<sup>60</sup> Even there, one must note that both Russell and Burgoyne are writing more widely on genres that include ancient world movies, rather than having them as their focus, as is the case with Richards. Such a charge of taking an insular and inward-looking view could certainly be levelled at this present article, which engages far more with Classical Reception publications on movies than film studies treatments of *The Lord of the Rings* movies.<sup>61</sup>

The inward-looking nature of Reception Studies on a wider theoretical level is in part (especially in the United Kingdom) a result of research funding protocols that privilege – or at least are thought to privilege – publishing in subject-related journals and series, and tend to militate against genuinely interdisciplinary studies.<sup>62</sup> But it is also partly a product of ideas about what is important about Reception Studies.

In 2003, Lorna Hardwick rejected the idea that studies of Reception only illuminate the receiving society; she insisted that they also ‘focus critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frame new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalized or forgotten’.<sup>63</sup> This is very true, but an argument has built up that this reflection back upon the ancient sources should be the prime or only concern of Reception Studies. This has been most forcefully expressed by Charles Martindale, who argues<sup>64</sup> that Classicists should only be interested in a reception if that reception ‘initiate[s] or inform[s] a significant dialogue with antiquity’.<sup>65</sup> He argues this in such a way as to privilege a focus upon antiquity. This, according to Martindale, justifies the presence of courses on Reception in the portfolio of Classics departments.

Whilst I understand Martindale’s desire to justify Reception within university Classics departments, I see a number of issues with this inward-looking approach. First, whether a text’s dialogue with the ancient world is ‘significant’ is subjective, though Martindale writes as if it is possible to make an objective

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60 Russell (2007); Burgoyne (2008); Richards (2008).

61 For which see, as a starting point, Thompson (2018).

62 The following discussion draws upon Keen (2014a) 246–247, (2014b), and (2014c).

63 Hardwick (2003) 4.

64 Most recently in Martindale (2013) 175–177.

65 Martindale (2013) 176.

judgement about this.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Martindale's 'dialogues' seem a little one-sided. This article has, I hope, shown that Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies demonstrate a complex pattern of Classical reception. Classical ideas are transmitted through Tolkien's own education into his texts and then into the movies. *The Lord of the Rings* then reshaped the ancient epic genre in general. This can stand as an example of the sort of receptions we should be aware of.

Secondly, this approach of privileging certain receptions over others seems to me to be an attempt to reaffirm the (or a) canon of literature and the primacy of written literature over other media and genres. This comes at a time when others (and I would include myself among them) see Reception Studies as a means of democratizing Classics.<sup>67</sup>

Thirdly, it has the potential to demean the academic areas in whose fields of study the receiving texts lie. As Martindale himself recognizes, it is important in Reception to be credible both to Classicists and to those who study the receiving text.<sup>68</sup>

It also follows, then, that the best scholars in Classical Reception will be those who are able to become credible both as Classicists and scholars in the receiving field.<sup>69</sup> This means that interdisciplinary collaboration is vital, and that requires a meeting of equals. That means that Classicists need to take an interest in the receiving text in its own right, not just as a means of illuminating Classical antiquity. We must not act as if all other disciplines are merely means of understanding the ancient world better.

Finally, to privilege the illumination of Greco-Roman antiquity detracts from the question of how later societies, including our own, engage with the Classical past. This is surely a question in which Classicists should be interested. Without wanting to invoke the dreaded term 'relevance', Classical Studies as a discipline should be engaging with the wider world, and understanding how the

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<sup>66</sup> Martindale (2006) 11 famously dismisses much of what is studied in Classical Reception as 'banal' and 'quotidian'. For challenges to this see Nisbet (2007) 157; Winkler (2009) 12–13; and Bakogianni (2017) 481.

<sup>67</sup> This is discussed from a number of angles in Hardwick & Harrison (2013).

<sup>68</sup> Martindale (2006) 9.

<sup>69</sup> A good example is Maria Wyke, who followed her doctorate in Classics with a year's study at the British Film Institute; see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/people/full-time-staff/maria-wyke> (accessed 4 July 2022).

wider world engages with our subject matter is an important part of strengthening the position of the discipline. Focusing primarily on the illumination of antiquity carries with it the danger of re-establishing under a different name the much-criticized ‘classical tradition’.<sup>70</sup>

In conclusion, then, to fully understand trends in ancient world movies of the twenty-first century, it is necessary to understand wider trends in cinema, in this case the influence of *The Lord of the Rings*. This is another example of the need for Classical Reception scholars to not just be experts in Classical Reception but also experts in the subject areas in which the receptions are taking place. Thus, we see (once again) that far from being the sinecure that its detractors sometimes allege, Classical Reception studies is one of the most intellectually demanding fields within Classics.

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<sup>70</sup> On the Classical tradition, see Hardwick (2003) 1–3; but see also the reassertion of the ‘Classical tradition’ as distinct from ‘reception’ in Silk, Gildenhard & Barrow (2014) 3–9.



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