

Posters on the Hill Address

First, I would like to thank Nancy Hensel and the organizers of the Council on Undergraduate Research for allowing me to speak today. But almost as much, I would like to thank every impossibly patient, meticulous, painstaking archaeologist who has ever cleaned individual mosaic tesserae with a toothbrush.

I am a Classicist, a student of Roman and Greek culture, so you could almost say I am contractually obligated to care about preservation. For a discipline in which “recent” can be generalized to, “after Christ,” and where our languages are continually relegated to the obituaries section, without conservation, we would be nothing – or, at least, on a different path (perhaps one to something our parents might consider more “practical”).

So I salute the grunt work. I especially admire the humility of those dental accessory-wielding archaeologists, who surely at some points must stop their brushing to think, “I am way too educated for this!” In research, as on a dig, the data is your foundation; some degree of monotony is unavoidable as you dredge it up, piece it together, and try to analyze it.

If it is not already obvious from my attempts to glorify it, my summer research involved a level of this kind of labor. I was working with the text of the so-called “Latin Josephus.” This is an ancient translation into Latin of the *Jewish War* of Flavius Josephus, a 1st century work originally composed in Aramaic, and later republished, by the author, in Ancient Greek. (Yes. That is a bit confusing, isn’t it?) Though the Aramaic version has been lost, we are left with an unusual boon today: both the Latin and the Greek versions of the *Jewish War* survive, the Greek being the work of Josephus himself, and the Latin adaptation the product of perhaps a couple centuries after his death.

Having these two works to compare to one another can give us a glimpse into the version of Josephus that most people read. At the time of its original publication on the printing press, in 1470, the work of Josephus was the second most popular book in the world besides the

Bible – but that first printed edition was of the Latin, *not* the original Greek.

Due to the popularity of the translation, as well as its comparative recency, the Latin version we have today may more accurately reflect the original translation than that of the Greek. This is a pretty commonsense guiding principle for textual critics: for a recent example, I could probably be more confident of the authenticity of a ten-year-old issue of *Time Magazine* than I could of one from their oldest archives that has been photocopied, transcribed, lost by an intern, and had coffee spilled on it.

Scholars of Josephus have, in the past, sometimes consulted the original Greek in order to amend the Latin, correcting what they think may have been transmission errors, a sort of linguistic typo. For our project, we had already planned to make an authoritative edition of the Latin available, something that did not exist before. But Professor Thomas Martin – a Josephus scholar, and my faculty research mentor – had the novel idea of taking advantage of the strength of the Latin to use it to “proof-read” our modern version of the Greek!

With my most sincere apologies to those of you who thought you had the different language versions of this text all sorted out, I have some bad news: there are multiple versions of the Latin Josephus. To tell the whole truth, there are multiple versions of the Greek, too – but for our purposes, we settled on a single, lovingly prepared edition of that, and set out to tackle the Latin.

And here is where my initial digression on the merits, as well as the frustrations, of minute details comes in. I spent a huge amount of my summer digitally transcribing, tagging, and just plain staring at Latin. I spent even more comparison-translating the Latin alongside the Greek, inserting a navigation system for the ease of those who would use this text as a tool. The *work* of my research, at times, consisted of tasks for which I felt just a touch overeducated.

But it was not until all the laborious entry was through, all the conservation concerns answered, that the creation of knowledge could begin. With all of that beautifully arranged data in place, I was finally able to start

on the more engaging work of identifying patterns, answering riddles, and drawing conclusions I would be delighted to share with you with if you make the mistake of asking me later.

Conservation is not necessarily the fun part. The creation of knowledge garners much more fanfare, and makes for better press releases - "Student Charts 569th Data Point" is something of a lackluster headline. Were the labor fruitless, I would have abandoned the practice altogether.

And some might think research in the humanities *is* fruitless, or at least thankless. In the sciences, the feedback is often flashier, and the conclusions more...conclusive. But humanities research, I came to realize, is about a different kind of knowledge – not anything that can be plugged into an equation or refute a theory.

I mean, some of it's not even *right*. One of the professors in my department taught a course on Ancient Science last year. Here's something that may be painfully obvious to most of you – a lot of ancient science is *dead wrong!* Why would an ostensibly intelligent man waste his time teaching the errors of the ancients?

Because it is beautiful to watch humanity stumble through our own uncertainty. Because their successes are inspiring and their failures telling. Whatever this knowledge may lack in accuracy, it makes up for in truth.

Perhaps most relevant today, this knowledge we're after is not the kind that waits patiently, a rule always available to be tested. (What is the radioactive half-life of a Homeric epithet?) If we let our cultural birthright decay through neglect, we accept the consequences. Conservation is an effort that we cannot afford to let up on, unless it is for things we are willing to lose.

It was that realization, the newfound respect for the grunt-work, that led me to do a few silly things. One, it led me to petition for a private course of instruction in digital analysis of ancient texts. And two, it led me to the conclusion that I am destined for academia. I knew it the first time I looked at the work I had assembled and felt like I had realized something about it, something surely no one else had seen before. I see the value of the monotony, because I've witnessed the creation that relies on it...and that is quite a sight to see.