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MIS)READING CATO: Tiro, Gellius, and Changing Conceptions of Empire

Cato the Elder's speech *Pro Rhodiensibus*, delivered to the Roman senate in 167 B.C.E., addressed a contemporary issue of empire, yet subsequent imperial authors interpret the speech within the frame of their own experience of empire. The Antonine miscellanist, Aulus Gellius, writing far from the imperial circle of the 2nd century C.E., has preserved the speech in fragmentary form in his *Attic Nights* when he responds to M. Tullius Tiro's criticisms of Cato's speech from the late first century B.C.E. Thus, the speech comes to us via two readings at two very different imperial moments: the second-century B.C.E. Cato is framed by the comments of the late republican Tiro who in turn is framed by the second-century C.E. Gellius. I demonstrate that these comments reveal misinterpretations of Cato's arguments in light of their own understandings of empire, tempered by their respective historical moments.

After Rome defeated Perseus in 168 B.C.E., the Rhodians, concerned that their prior involvement, however innocuous, with Perseus could be misinterpreted as an act of hostility towards Rome, went there to plead their case. The senate was divided on the matter with some senators urging war and others moderation (Gellius, 6.3.7). At this point Cato rose and delivered a speech in which he urged the senate to be cautious in its actions towards Rhodes. During Cato's lifetime, the period of Roman conquest, relationships between Rome and her eastern neighbors were still being negotiated. This speech shows Cato trying to keep the integrity of Roman power intact all the while developing the idea of *clementia* towards the weaker states. Tiro who was living in a tributary state was indignant that a prominent member of the senate such as Cato would dare to advocate on the Rhodians's behalf and vehemently objects (6.3.15). Rhodes was guilty and should reap the punishment of a misbehaving tributary state. Gellius disagrees, Rhodes is a faithful ally and as such Cato was acting in the best interest of the state in defending her from the men who desired to plunder her and possess her wealth (6.3.17-18).

The misunderstanding of Rhodes's status described above illustrates how the Romans defined themselves in terms of their perceptions of the acquisition, rule, and shape of empire in the three moments of the Roman empire represented by Cato, Tiro, and Gellius. Close consideration of Gellius' commentary on Tiro's letter critiquing Cato's speech provides a unique insight into this process and is important for our overall knowledge of Roman History.