

Cato the Elder's speech *Pro Rhodiensibus* delivered in 167 B.C.E. on the eve of retaliatory action against Rhodes, survives only in fragments as quoted by Aulus Gellius, author of the *Noctes Atticae*. As the only surviving speech concerning a Roman debate on the declaration of war, it is important to any scholar of Roman history. The problem inherent in any fragmentary work is one of form and content. We cannot be sure how much of the original speech survives or of its original frame. I argue that within the fragments Cato is actively negotiating the transforming power of empire over the Romans themselves and that his reading of Rhodian history is his primary tool in this negotiation.

The historical reputation of Rhodes' neutrality has not gone unnoticed by scholars, present-day and ancient alike. Appian evoked knowledge of Rhodian history to stir certain feelings among his readers, as A. Gowing has proven (*AHB* 5.5-6 1991, 135-144). The historical treatment of Rhodes as presented by S. Ager (*Historia* 40 1991, 10-41) provides a broad overview of Rhodes' reputation of neutrality and of the championing of Greek freedom. I contribute a reading that extends beyond the immediate relationship between Rome and Rhodes and briefly articulate Rhodes' historical relationships with other historical "empires" to show how Cato interprets this history to create Roman imperial identity and ideology. My approach to the topic is not primarily historical, however. I read Cato's speech within the context of the cultural, social, and political milieu of the mid-second century B.C.E. by investigating the analogies Cato uses to describe the Roman/Rhodian relationship. To start with Cato articulates the relationship as one of subordination: the Rhodians who were the champions of Greek *libertas* within the Greek world fear that they will become *servi* if the Romans have no external enemy and continue their expansion eastward unchecked. However, as the argument progresses Cato locates the Rhodians squarely within the private world of Roman aristocrats by equating the Rhodian desire for freedom with the Romans' desire for private gain. Finally, Cato turns to an example of civic law that applies only to Roman citizens and more to the point, to Roman aristocrats, which limits the amount of land and cattle an aristocrat can own. The twist comes at the end, as is characteristic of Cato: the Rhodians have become Roman citizens.

I argue that Rhodes' history is the background for this speech and when it is read in light of Rhodes' past prosperity and present position Rome's eventual rise to greatness is foreshadowed. This "prediction" comes with a warning: if the Romans are not careful they may become the Rhodians. This negotiation of imperial identity and ideology greatly influenced who the Romans became in the imperial period. My argument illuminates the anxieties created by this process of imperialism among the conservative and aristocratic elite of Cato's era.