Chapter 7

‘Heus tu, rhetorisce’: Gellius, Cicero, Plutarch, and Roman Study Abroad

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Introduction; or, aliae creterrae

In the middle of the second century CE, a young Roman named Aulus Gellius went to Athens to study. He was not the only Roman at Athens, nor the only student. He studied philosophy and rhetoric with prominent teachers of the day. Several generations earlier, Marcus Cicero, son of the orator, was sent to Athens to study by his father, who had himself toured the cities of Greece as younger man. Several, perhaps many, of Marcus’s peers were also in Athens at the same time. From a few literary accounts we have this evidence, and from this literary evidence modern historians have identified an ancient Roman practice very much like the modern one of study abroad.¹ Taking Gellius’s Noctes Atticae as its primary focus, this chapter will seek to reexamine the literary evidence for Roman study abroad qua literary evidence, and to interrogate that evidence more closely for what perspective, if any, it might offer on the experience of Roman imperial power.

What did study abroad mean in the Roman empire? Encomia of study abroad tend to advance two possible (and non-exclusive) rewards from the practice: first, that going to another—any other country—country is inherently rewarding and enriching, and second, that a particular country will confer benefits of experience, intellect or reputation on the student. Roman study abroad at Athens springs largely from the latter understanding on the part of Romans: Athens is special. A phenomenon discussed less often in modern study abroad is the effect on study abroad of an imbalanced power relationship between the origin and destination states. The academic world of the empire involved plenty of travel for study, most apparent in the record by Greeks between different Greek cities, or by Westerners around the West. But a Roman travelling from the seat of power east to study in Athens (or one of the other ancient centres of Greek learning)—to which this study is limited—is perhaps far closer to the dynamics of imperial power. Rome’s history of conquest of Greece, its

¹ Daly 1950.
native scepticism but also fetish for Hellenic culture, and the persistence in Greece of native civic structures into which visiting Romans have the option of integrating themselves—all of these give study abroad the potential to be powerfully fraught with cultural politics.2

Our best single body of experiential evidence for Roman study abroad in Athens is in the recollections woven throughout the Noctes Atticae of Aulus Gellius. It is there that we find Roman study abroad as a fully formed literary motif, integrated carefully into a larger narrative, and treated directly in personal recollections. This paper takes Gellius' account of study abroad as its main focus, using Cicero and Plutarch as foils through which to understand what study abroad means to Gellius, what function it serves in the Noctes Atticae, and to what extent the dynamics of imperial power are a part of that meaning and function. It argues that Gellius' depictions of study abroad depend for their force on a sensitivity to the Greek experience of study abroad as an articulation of Roman imperial power, not in the specifics of imperial policy but rather in the way the imbalance of power between (Greek) teachers and (Roman) students, and the Romans' varying attitudes toward the paideia for which they have ostensibly come to Athens. Gellius shows many of the same concerns as our earlier sources for study abroad, and is likely informed by some of them; but only Gellius applies the various Roman concerns for representing study abroad to other Romans with an understanding of how Greeks view Roman students. Roman study abroad, for Gellius, is a learning experience not just of curriculum or language, but of national identity; and that challenge of national identity is an integral part of the educational lesson. Gellius, uniquely among Roman sources on study abroad, sees reflected back the version of intellectual Roman-ness which the Greeks have constructed for him, and incorporates that vision into his own programme for intellectual self-improvement.

As a literary motif, study abroad figures as a recalled experience of substantial learning and changes to the student's worldview. It is necessarily a matter of revisiting experiences, of looking back at a youthful self with more mature eyes. Study abroad reminiscences do not take up most or even much of the Noctes, but they do establish critical patterns of self-reexamination. It is no accident that all of the key experiences and settings of Gellius' study abroad experience recur at least once or twice, and frequently in ways that complicate or elaborate the initial picture they give. Through the technique Johnson

2 For a broader picture of Romans in Greece, Errington 1998; nb esp. 150 n50, contra Marrou 1982: 384 n7, that no Romans seem to have been sent to Athens to join the ephebeia. We might also think of Greeks who would come to Rome for specialist study, such as would-be nomikoi; regrettably we lack accounts of their experience. See Jones 2007.