

## Intellectual Culture

Attic Nights is both product of and participant in Roman imperial intellectual culture. The scenes and narratives of intellectual groups at Rome and Athens emphasize this culture's primarily social form (Johnson), and yet Gellius' juxtaposed citations model the individual scholar at work deconstructing his private readings (Howley). Scattered across the collection are essays grouped by location: scenes at Athens, banquets, libraries, bookshops, or on the road. A sense of chance and randomness (the word forte, "by chance," pervades the miscellany) describes how Gellius navigates a textual world without the ordering technology and systems to which we are accustomed (Fitzgerald). Intellectual culture is overall competitive, pitting Latin against Greek, past against present, elite against elite. Gellius reserves particular criticism for grammatici, authors of commentarii and supposed experts on ancient texts, language, and interpretation, who often come to verbal blows with—and lose to—philosophers.

*"Saturnalibus Athenis alea quadam festiva et honesta, lusitabamus huiuscemodi: ubi conveneramus conplusculi eiusdem studii homines ad lavandi tempus, captiones quae 'sophismata' appellantur mente agitabamus easque, quasi talos aut tesseras, in medium vice sua quisque iaciebamus. Captiones solutae aut parum intellectae praemium poenave erat nummus unus sestertius. Hoc aere collecto, quasi manuario, cenula curabatur omnibus qui cum lusum luseramus (18.13.1-5)*

"During the Saturnalia at Athens, we were often playing a certain fun and respectable game in this way: when many men of the same study had come together at the time of bathing, we were tossing about in our mind these arguments which are called 'sophisms' as if knuckle-bones or dice, and each was casting into the midst on his own turn. One sestertius coin was either the prize or punishment for the untangled or not at all understood question. With this gathered money, like money won at a dice game, dinner was taken care of for all who played this game."

## Aulus Gellius & His Miscellany, *Attic Nights*

The relevance of Aulus Gellius and his *Attic Nights* for this project is twofold: First, he writes in and about the intellectual culture of the 2nd century, a key period under the Roman Empire in which scholarly activity flourished (the Second Sophistic), Christian thought and practice began to spread, and advancements in textual technology were on the horizon (the codex). Gellius drops us into the elite, social, competitive world of intellectuals hunched over books, crowded around a dining table, or arguing with show-off grammatici at bookshops. Second, in the *Attic Nights* culminates the emergence of "miscellany," a genre which shares an affinity for juxtaposition, arrangement, and diversity—what Fitzgerald theorizes as "variety"—with ancient collections of poetry or letters. In his preface, Gellius formulates a list of titles of previous miscellanies whose pastoral or dining themes evoke how a reader might actually read such a collection: like a bee buzzing through a field, drawn to the brightest or most vital of flowers, or else like a diner encountering dish after dish in a banquet's surprising, exciting sequence. The title of *Attic Nights*, on the other hand, consciously points back to the long winter nights its author spent in Athens, compiling the notes which would become the basis for his project. Gellius' miscellany comprises twenty books of essays varying in length on subjects from philosophy, to etymology, to history, to natural science, each curated not only to peak a reader's interest or even to explicitly instruct him on correct knowledge, but (according to Howley) to model a critical scholarly method bent on evaluating authority. From these findings, further work can be done, as Heath began, to consider how Christian miscellanists of the 2nd century like Clement of Alexandria engaged with the genre for their own didactic and doctrinal purposes.

*sed modica ex his eaque sola accipi quae aut ingenia prompta expeditaque ad honestae eruditionis cupidinem utiliumque artium contemplationem celeri faciliq[ue] compendio ducerent aut homines aliis iam vitae negotiis occupatos a turpi certe agrestique rerum atque verborum imperitia vindicarent (Praef. 1.12)*

"but I accepted these few things alone from those which, visible and at hand, lead men then occupied with other duties of life towards the desire for respectable instruction and the consideration of useful arts with a quick and easy shortcut or rescue them from the ugly and obviously rustic ignorance of matters and words" (Praef. 1.12)

## Epistolary Communication

Gellius touches on the market for published letter collections at Rome and beyond as well as their place within the intellectual culture of the 2nd century CE. Letters between Philip of Macedon and Aristotle or Alexander and his mother give access to the voices of impressive historical figures, often with a didactic function. Citing Tiro's letters allows Gellius to criticize him at his own word, to integrate current hot topics amongst intellectuals of his day into his miscellany, and to showcase his own impressive juggling of various sources to answer one question (see essay 2.10). In the *Attic Nights*, epistolary communication points to how elites related with one another as friends and as competitors. Practically, Gellius' frequent citation of letters shows their availability, and he advises his readers to seek out copies for themselves.

*Commodius autem rectiusque de his meis verbis, quibus Tullio Tironi respondimus, existimabit iudiciumque faciet, qui et orationem ipsam totam Catonis acceperit in manus et epistolam Tironis ad Axiuum scriptam requirere et legere curaverit. Ita enim nos sincerius exploratusque vel corrigere poterit vel probare (6.3.55)*

"Nevertheless he will think and judge more completely and correctly on these words of mine, with which I am responding to Tullius Tiro, who takes in hand the Cato's whole speech itself and takes care to seek out and to read Tiro's letter which he wrote to Axius. Thus indeed, he will be able to either correct or approve me more soundly and certainly."

## The Socio-Literary Matrix of Christian Literary Composition

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## Book as Commodity

Scholars still debate ancient literacy rates, but have moved towards a more complicated model of "literacies," the plural encompassing not only literary elites but also more practical, functional forms of literacy based on the wide variety of texts, languages, and symbols (eg. lists, inscriptions, games, etc.) of which everyday Roman life consisted (Johnson). Nevertheless, the book (liber) whether in the form of a papyrus scroll (volumen) or a codex remains a marker of intellectual status. Elites send books as gifts, testaments to relationships of friendship, and scholars bring them in as final arbiters in their intellectual battles. In Gellius, the older the copy, the more valuable it is; copies supposedly written in the author's original hand are especially prized. This, however, disguises not only the prevalence or utility, but integrality of slaves and freedmen to the book market given that they and not the authors themselves primarily copied, wrote by dictation, and read aloud from the texts these elites claim to hold "in hand" (Winsbury).

*...egressique e navi in terram in portu illo incito spatiaremur, quem Q. Ennius remotiore paulum, sed admodum scito vocabulo "praepetem" appellavit, fascis librorum venalium expositos vidimus. Atque ego avidè statim pergo ad libros. Erant autem isti omnes libri Graeci miraculorum fabularumque pleni...scriptores veteres non parvae auctoritatis: Aristaeas Proconnesius et Isigonus Nicaeensis et Ctesias et Onesicritus et Philostephanus et Hegesias; ipsa volumina ex diutino situ squalebant et habitu aspectuque taetro erant. Accessi tamen percontatusque pretium sum et, adductus mira atque inseperta vilitate, libros plurimos aere paucò emo... (9.4.1-3)*

"...having exited from the ship onto dry ground, I walked about in that famous port which Ennius called—with a somewhat disconnected, but very apt word—"lucky," and I saw exposed bundles of books for sale. Greedily, I immediately hastened towards the books. Nevertheless these books were all Greek, full of miracles and stories...old authors of no small authority: Aristaeas of Proconnesus, Isigonus of Nicaea, Ctesias and Onesicritus, Philostephanus and Hegesias. The scrolls themselves were dirty from long-lasting neglect, and they were of a hideous condition and appearance. Nevertheless I approached and asked their price and, since I am drawn to wonders and surprises, I bought most books for a small price."



## Slaves & Freedmen

Slaves and freedmen perpetuated literacy and literary production under the Roman Empire (Winsbury). Their efforts are largely erased from Gellius' record; suffice to note that books are read (leguntur), and his reader knows how to fill in the gaps. In essay 17.9, Gellius relates one way in which Histaeus sends a covert message, tattooing it onto his slave's skull. Howley reads this as metaphor for Roman culture wherein slaves, their minds and their bodies, constitute the blank parchment of intellectual production. Another essay in *Attic Nights* narratives how a slave sentenced to death in the gladiatorial arena meets a lion he had previously befriended and, circulating his story on a tabula, wins the favor of the populus (5.14). Though beyond belief, the story concentrates themes relevant to early Christian knowledge production and circulation such as subversive actors, threat of punishment, and the popularization of texts bearing witness to miracles. Finally, Howley shows how Gellius systematically undercuts the authority of Tiro—known for his literary relationship with his patron, Cicero, but also as a scholar in his own right—on the basis of his status as a freedman.

*Haec Apion dixisse Androclum tradit, eaque omnia scripta circumlataque tabula populo declarata, atque ideo cunctis petentibus dimissum Androclum et poena solutum leonemque ei suffragiis populi donatum (5.14.29-30)*

"Apion passed down that Androclus had said these things, and that all these writings had been written and circulated and become public for the people on a tablet, and for that reason, that Androclus had been freed by all those asking and released from punishment and that the lion had been given to him by the people's votes."

## Material Texts

While the codex emerged in the 2nd century CE (based on some evidence from Martial), the preface to *Attic Nights* makes explicit reference to volumina, the papyrus rolls on which Gellius and most other ancient authors wrote. Evidence on the prevalence of material texts is sparse, so scholars remain conflicted about the extent to which Roman intellectual culture relied on books or how much more so than their ancient Athenian counterparts—both were primarily oral societies. Scholarship idealizing the Second Sophistic as an golden age for literature has trended towards overestimating the number of libraries and bookshops available to ancient Roman intellectuals, modelling the ancient system of "publishing" closer to our own than available evidence allows (Winsbury). Gellius tells of books for sale along the Sandaliario street as well as lying around in dirty piles at the port. Bookshops are sites where Gellius imagines himself, grammatici, philosophers, and poets spending time. For Winsbury, libraries manifest Roman imperial power, for book collections were seized during city sacks, confiscated, and made available to the public by successive emperors. In the *Attic Nights*, however, they are simply places where one may happen upon a useful book; Gellius includes libraries at the temple of Hercules, the temple of Peace in the Forum Pacis, Tiberius' library, at Patrae, the temple of Trajan, and at Tibur. Material texts make a level of exactitude available to Gellius and others in their intellectual knowledge, but rather than hoarding books, the miscellanist insists on how he commits only the most valuable parts to memory or to his notes.

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