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CONTENTS

STUDIES AND ARTICLES

Mădălina Strehie, <i>THE DISCURSIVE OBSESSION OF CATO CENSOR</i>	7
Kalkaman Zhumagulov, Aigerim Akynova, Gulnar Kozgambayeva, Aliya Ospanova, <i>THE TIME OF GREAT CHANGES: THE MIGRATION PERIOD AS A STAGE IN THE EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE ORIGIN</i>	15
Irina V. Ladikova, <i>VORONTSOV DYNASTY'S CORRESPONDENCE AS A SOURCE OF THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN EUROPE OF XVIII-XIX CENTURIES</i>	25
Nguyen Van Sang, <i>THE BRITISH-AMERICAN DIPLOMACY IN SEARCHING FOR THE NORTHEAST BOUNDARY IN MAINE AND NEW BRUNSWICK, 1820-1846</i>	35
Marilena Rizescu, <i>EUGENE SCHUYLER AND THE FIRST AMERICAN LEGACY IN ROMANIA</i>	49
Aleksandr G. Gryaznukhin, Tatiana V. Gryaznukhina, <i>THE IMPACT OF COMMUNIST LEADERS ON THE FORMATION OF LOYAL MASSES AFTER THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION 1917 IN THE REGIONS OF FORMER RUSSIAN EMPIRE</i>	67
Cristina Ruiz-Alberdi Fernández, Fidel Rodríguez Legendre, <i>THE LIFE OF THE SPANISH WOMAN UNDER THE FRANCOIST REGIME (1940-1978)</i>	85
Vasyl Ilnytskyi, Vitalii Telvak, <i>OPERATIVE INVESTIGATIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF UKRAINIAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN ROMANIAN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC (1955-1957) BY THE SOVIET REPRESSIVE BODIES</i>	97
Andreea Gavrilă, Marina Anatolievna Shpakovskaya, <i>THE EU POLICY TOWARDS THE POST SOVIET COUNTRIES FROM THE BLACK SEA REGION</i>	109

BOOK REVIEW

Marius Oanță (coordinator), <i>Studies of Ecclesiastical History</i> , Craiova, Sitech Publishing Press, 2018, 318 pages (Bogdan Emanuel Răduț).....	119
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STUDIES AND ARTICLES

THE DISCURSIVE OBSESSION OF CATO CENSOR*

Mădălina Strehie**

Abstract

Cato the Censor or Cato the Elder was a Roman statesman known for his conservatism and traditionalism. He is said to have been a successful lawyer who never lost any case, he delivered memorable speeches on various political, legal or economic themes, each time concluding his speeches in an obsessive manner: *Censeo Carthago delenda esse. I think Carthage should be destroyed* – our transl.

This discursive obsession of Cato Maior, who remained in history as Cato the Censor due to the perfect exercise of the censor magistracy, denotes not only his traditionalism, his conservative affinities, but also a fear of Rome's enemies/rivals. Carthage was at that time the power which dominated the Mediterranean Sea, having a strong empire and great financial influence, facing the Roman ambitions of expansion in the region, and also the Roman state's existence literally, as proven during the Punic Wars.

Although a rigid conservative in conceptions, Cato the Censor was a great Roman patriot, a man of distinguished culture, an exceptional jurist, he wrote several works of economic and literary value, always supported the Roman state and fought with all his powers, in particular the power of his words, for the supremacy of the Eternal City. He believed that the enemies of Rome had to be eliminated, only in that way could Rome become a great power, even if these considerations also betrayed the fear of the foreigners/enemies of the Romans. Cato the Censor demonstrated that Rome could defeat them by tenacity and by following the **mos maiorum**, his main argument in Roman politics.

Key words: *political discourse, Cato the Censor, enemies, ancient Rome, conservatism*

Introduction

Perhaps the most famous representative of the *ordo equester*, Marcus Porcius Cato, also referred to as Cato Censor, Cato Maior or Cato the Elder was born around 234 BC. in Tusculum in the Italic Peninsula. He was most commonly known by his cognomen, acquired after he successfully accomplished the magistracy of *censor*, which was part of *cursus honorum*. Cato due to his merits in service of his country was *adlectus in amplissimum ordinem*, and therefore he became member of the *ordo senatorius*, the class for which *cursus honorum* was intended. Therefore, Cato Censor was able to rise above his social status through his achievements, being one of the most renowned censors,

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(a position reserved for the Roman aristocracy, represented by the *ordo senatorius*), hence his cognomen. Taking this into consideration, in our study we will refer to him as Cato Censor and not by his other names.

Cato Censor earned his place in Roman history not only as the symbol of Roman nationalism, but also as one of patriotism manifested towards the Eternal City, zealously supporting Roman tradition and everything that pertained to Roman national identity. Cato, this symbol of conservatism, was also a notable statesman, with an outstanding activity, involving himself in military, political, administrative affairs, as well as in law, history, literature, economy and being a censor of moral values. One would not be wrong in saying that his theories formed the basis for the ideology of the *Optimates* faction, even if he belonged to the *ordo equester* by his lineage. Additionally, Cato Censor was a representative of Roman puritanism, because in all his speeches (which have been sadly lost to time) he supported romanocentrism and the supremacy of Rome through destruction of its enemies.

The historical writing of Cato Censor, *Origines*, had all the markings of a “Dominant history of Rome” and its traits fulfilled seven different roles: “1. Educative-patriotic and moralising; 2. Romanocentrism; 3. Partisan spirit; 4. Accent on verisimilitude; 5. Anthropocentrism; 6. Powerful literary nature 7. Stylistic autonomy” (Cizek, 2003: 112-113).

To this day, Cato Censor’s career is still impressive. He was *adlectus in amplissimum ordinem*, most likely, after distinguishing himself in the Second Punic War, the so-called Hannibal’s war. We know for sure that he fought on the Cannae front and even in the battle of Trasimenus. He began *cursus honorum*, making a name for himself in the magistracy of *censor*, but climbs to the peak of his career becoming a *consul*. He makes himself known as a jurist in 215 B.C., amidst the controversies regarding the *Lex Oppia* (Cizek, 2003: 119).

Due to his direct participation in the Punic War, Cato Censor harbored genuine hatred caused, most likely, by a fear of the Punic strangers which had humiliated Rome in the aforementioned battles. Cato Censor harbored hate and contempt towards all foreigners, but he was also afraid of their influence on Rome. Whether they were Greeks, Carthaginians or Orientals, all strangers were perceived by Cato as being *hostes*. Due to the conditions in which he conducted his political-administrative activity, the statesman formed certain biases which influenced his attitude, even towards fellow Romans, who imitated the customs of strangers; for instance, towards the family of the Scipiones, who admired Greek culture, even if a Scipio was the one who defeated Hannibal.

As a consul, Cato was a military commander of the Roman state, as a prerogative of the function. In 195 BC, he barely manages to defeat the Iberians who were rebelling against Rome. This campaign was followed by another military offensive in 191 BC in Macedonia, where he defeated the Seleucid king (Șarambei, Șarambei, n.d.: 58-59). Cato hated strangers especially due to fear of their potential influence on his country. He was, in essence, a great Roman patriot, representative for conservative nationalism and being among the first in the world to practice it, strongly supporting the interests of Rome, whether they were economic, military, political, territorial or otherwise. In his economic vision, Cato thought that Rome needed “commercial

navigation” in the Mediterranean, where Carthage ruled supreme, being Rome’s most feared “naval competitor”. This determined Cato to “obsess about Carthage” (Șarambei, Șarambei, n.d.: 59). Cato Censor noticed a potential formidable adversary in Carthage, due to the ambivalent nature of his power: control over the sea and economic expansion, due to the commerce he controlled by means of his colonies and satellites. He considered this rival of Rome important due to commercial navigation, especially in the Mediterranean Sea, which gave the Punic power an unmatched financial potential.

Therefore, *Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delenda* was a natural consequence of Cato’s conception, who had been humiliated in many lost battles, and felt uncontrollable fear because of these Punic strangers. He observed the military and human losses they had caused (the Roman army being almost destroyed in the disasters at Cannae and Trasimenus) and found out about the civilian losses in his beloved Rome, when women and children committed suicide out of fear of falling into the hands of the Punic strangers, famed for their *crudelitas*. He felt the same fear as the entirety of Rome, a fear which remained deeply engraved in the collective consciousness through the expression *Hannibal ante portas*.

Taking all of this into account, Cato Censor, who came from a family of military professionals, reached the conclusion that the best enemy is one that is eliminated, explaining his obsession. Our study analyses this rhetorical fixation of Cato’s, presenting its causes and consequences for Romans and for Rome.

The Causes of Cato Censor’s Discursive Obsession

To find out the causes of Cato Censor’s obsessive speech, first, we must understand how his conceptions were formed, which determined his actions in the very complicated political context he lived in. The great roman statesman inaugurated the *hominum novorum* gallery, which practically began with him, being promoted for personal merits in the *ordo senatorius*, superior to *ordo equester*, order he belonged to by birthright. Even if he was newly promoted in the ranks of aristocracy, Cato quickly climbed the hierarchy and achieved the rank of consul, behaving more like an aristocrat than many aristocrats.

He describes his ideas about Roman politics in *Origines*, a history of Rome which Cato wrote in seven books, a work in which he had the ambition of describing Rome’s entire history, starting with its founding, finding within its pages a justification for “Roman expansionist policies” (Șarambei, Șarambei, n.d.: 59). Through his literary works, he demonstrates that he is an ultranationalist, being, as Eugen Cizek says, “the inventor of Roman historical monograph” (Cizek, 2003: 122). The history he wrote was about Rome and for Rome, having powerful anti-foreign themes. Cato considered that Rome belonged to the Romans and hated the Greeks (except the Spartans, however) and the Carthaginians. Even if he hated the Greeks, he feared them because of their culture, and he hated the Carthaginians because of the experience he lived as a young recruit on the battlefield.

Origines preaches two main ideas: respecting the *mos maiorum* (Roman politics had to revolve around this tradition of the ancestors) and the *terra Italica* (Rome and all of its territorial possessions in the Italic Peninsula). These two concepts had to be

applied by statesmen who needed to dedicate their lives, talent and intellect in the interests of this hallowed ground, Rome. The hero of his history is not a politician, a god or a historical personality, but instead, the “people of Italy and especially Rome” (Cizek, 2003: 123). Therefore, through his history, Cato Censor proves that he is a “lucid conservative, ..., enlightened, ..., a consequent republican, not only a fanatic but also ferocious” (Cizek, 2003: 123). The main ideological message of his works is the “feeling of the reality of Italic unification around Rome” (Grimal, 1997: 100-102).

His conceptions are also noticeable in the plethora of speeches which he held as a lawyer. We have some information regarding the contents of Cato's speeches, although they have been sadly lost to time. Cato Censor believed that Rome needed to be original without imitating other civilizations, such as the Greek one, regarding political institutions. Being well versed in Roman law, he considered that Rome should guide itself by its own values and laws. In many of his speeches, Cato criticizes the political shortcomings and the corruption of the Roman institutions, holding speeches about the “incorrect elections” of some Roman magistrates. In these demonstrations of speech craft, Cato Censor appears first as a lawyer, being a protector of “civil liberties”, fervently attacking statesmen who showed desire for personal glory as opposed to the glory of Rome, or those who unjustly condemned Roman “free men” (Grimal, 1997: 103).

A man devoted to the rule of the law, Cato Censor argued in his speeches not only for Roman law, but also for everybody to obey it, especially the Romans. He considered the Greek habits unfitting for Romans. He held many speeches against waste, the most famous one being the speech held in support of the *Lex Oppia*.

As a commander of Rome sent to Hispania to reestablish Roman order, he did not take the spoils of war and pillage himself as was customary, but instead, he deposited them directly into Rome's vaults. His patriotism was also visible in diplomacy. Sent in a diplomatic mission in the Greece, he refused to speak Greek, even if he knew the language, answering only to Latin (Grimal, 1997: 99). Cato Censor was a veritable statesman who hated the Greeks, considering them strangers who defiled Roman tradition, but he also had a sort of envy for their cultural superiority, which influenced and continued to influence many Romans of his time.

De agri cultura sive De re rustica, even if it was a treatise on agronomy, reflected a reality in Roman society, namely that agriculture was the basis of Roman economy (Grimal, 1997: 103), Cato offering guidelines for obtaining a production which could assure the self-sufficiency of landowners. The Roman aristocracy, to which Cato belonged as well, thanks to the change of his social status, held, at the time, a dominant role in Italic agriculture, most of the land being in the hands of aristocrats. According to Cato, this Roman “rural spirit” led to Rome's victory over the Greeks, who had attempted to morally attack Roman identity, but also other, much more deceitful foreigners (the Carthaginians) who had tried at Rome's heart itself, in a much more direct manner, through economic, military and territorial dominance. We can say that through his treatise on agricultural activity, Cato supported the idea of a national Roman economy, which would offer it autonomy in the context of the economical war between Rome and Carthage.

Through all of his rhetorical works, Cato Censor also pointed out the qualities a Roman public speaker must possess. He must, first, serve his country, and to do this, the orator simply had to be a “good man – *vir bonus* – skilled in speaking” (Fredouille, 2000: 42). Because of this, in internal politics, Cato was a *vir bonus* who took note of and commented on all the shortcomings of his fellow Roman politicians. Not even the Roman heroes were spared – the family of the Scipiones – or the electoral corruption present in not only the political, but also the administrative system, considering the corruption of Rome’s magistrates a “serious threat to the balance of the Roman institutions” (Fredouille, 2000: 42).

The great statesman considered that Rome had to be strong and fair on the inside to resist external threats. Internally, the law and *mos maiorum* were responsible for assuring the strength of the institutions, and externally, the army and a good economical and foreign policy. Rome could not let itself be caught up in internal fights, out on the whim of the major personalities, influenced by Hellenistic circles, whose interests never intersected with the interests of Rome. Cato Censor struggled with these problems in his life as a lawyer, but also in his activities as a landowner. The internal struggle was damaging to Rome, who had to face powerful enemies such as the Carthaginians.

The patriot statesman also had a ranking of Rome’s enemies: the Greeks were first because they acted upon Rome in much more subtle ways: through culture, language, education and immigration, which brought about Oriental decadence (Marinescu, 2003: 24-26). The second place was occupied by the Carthaginians because of their economic power and naval empire.

As a *clarissimus vir*, Cato shone in all aspects of public life. He always acted like a devout patriot, pledging his life in service of Rome, for his *terra*, but also for the *mos*. As a politician, he also shone through speech craft, being one of the most renowned orators of his time, nicknamed the “Demosthenes of Rome”. As a consul, he ruled over the province of Sardinia, serving his country with dignity, without accepting the bribes and gifts which were usually offered to governors; he considered this custom different from the *mos maiorum*, borrowed from a people he despised even more than the Carthaginians, the Greeks. He considered them: “a people rotten to the core, unable to lead itself.” (Plutarh trans., 2004: 103-115).

Why *Carthago Delenda Esse*?

This is a very common question among those concerned with the study of Cato’s life and works. Arguments and answers to this question are uncovered by careful study of his biography and works.

1. *Carthago delenda esse* because it was the foreign city which Cato feared the most, therefore also hating it the most. Hannibal’s terrible power almost left the Romans without an army in Cato’s youth. Hannibal destroyed Rome on *terra Italica*, the Cannae and Trasimene disasters leaving a lasting impression on Cato Censor, who was an active belligerent and considered they should never be repeated. Particularly because he was a belligerent he felt the bitter taste of the humiliation the Roman army suffered. Cato’s fear of the Carthaginians was therefore justified, it grew along with his hatred but also with his desire for vengeance. We can say that the statesman Cato was

born on the battlefields of Cannae and Trasimene. He was a politician with many different sides to him, “a warrior, magistrate, consul, farmer, merchant”, he had a “family” (De Coulanges trans., 1984: 40; 67) to protect which was the entirety of Rome.

2. *Carthago delenda esse* because the Carthaginian power, of extraordinary commercial, financial, colonial and naval force, opposed Roman imperialism. Carthage not only stole the “vital space” needed for Roman expansion, but also a part of *terra Italica*, the southern seaside and isles being the cause of the war which made the two civilizations clash. The fear fully acts on Rome, and maybe the Carthaginians were the strangers whom the Romans feared the most, and the *Hannibal ante portas* episode was the paroxysmal moment of this terror. Cato thought that Rome could not develop as a great power with such a powerful neighbor.

3. *Carthago delenda esse* because this omnipotent Carthaginian power had to be eliminated from the Mediterranean. The Carthaginians were a hindrance to Roman economy and to all Roman interests in the region, and Cato Censor, in addition to be a magistrate, was also a businessman, an aristocrat – an economic agent with his own personal ambitions. The second Punic war, which was the most damaging to the Romans, was supported by the Roman “business means” (Bordet, n.d.: 95-101) which aspired to breach into the economic market dominated by Carthage.

4. *Carthago delenda esse* because Roman law, which Cato Censor followed with all his might, did not give economic rights to foreigners on Roman soil. The Roman law, described by the Senate as “ruling body of the roman community...the law made obvious the will of the people” (Crawford, 1997: 56), and the will of the Roman people was for Rome to dominate the Mediterranean, and through it, the entire world. Roman law also supported Roman interests, no matter their nature. Cato, a Roman lawyer, fought against all those who wished to change the will of the Roman people. In the Punic war he took part of, the willpower of the people was close to being eliminated; therefore, he saw the invaders from Cannae, Trasimene and Rome’s gates, the deceitful Carthaginians, powerful strangers and neighbor, as worthy of being punished.

5. *Carthago delenda esse* because it was on the mind of an entire people, who found the most fitting representative to be Cato Censor. “*Fides*”, the goddess of the Romans, required revenge after Rome was one step from being wiped out. National consciousness, tenacity and pragmatism allowed the Romans to close a favorable peace. The Romans reorganized in a remarkable way after the successive disasters, maybe in part due to the *mos maiorum* which Cato considered sacred, because only through a general mobilization were the Romans able to defeat the strangers they were both fearful and hateful of. The Romans had an entirely different world from the Carthaginians, “the Roman world was based on a complex system of exchanges, perfectly codified, which, regardless of their nature, were built on a unique bond... it’s about *Fides*... Rome was therefore built on an entire series of relationships which were not at all material, which did not pertain to objects, but had exceptional importance” (Roman, 2007: 132-133). It was indeed Roman nationalism which defeated Punic mercenaryism.