

**NERO AND IMPERIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IN PLINY'S *NATURAL HISTORY***Dr. Trevor S. Luke, Florida State University ~ [tluke@fsu.edu](mailto:tluke@fsu.edu)

- I. 7.8: Caligula and Nero, "Firebrands of the World"  
*Infelici terris stirpe omni sed per utrasque Agrippinas maxime, quae Gaium, quae Domitium Neronem principes genuere totidem faces generis humani*
- By the misfortune caused to the world by his whole progeny but especially through his two daughters who bore the emperors Gaius and Domitius Nero, both firebrands of humankind.\*
- II. 22.46: Nero as Poison  
*Veneno Tiberio Claudio principi per hanc occasionem ab coniuge Agrippina dato, quo facto illa terris venenum alterum sibique ante omnes Neronem suum dedit.*
- Poison was delivered to Tiberius Claudius by this means by his wife Agrippina, who, having done this, bestowed upon the whole world, and on herself especially, another poison—her own Nero.
- III. 30.5: Nero's Virtues  
*Ad hoc non opes defuere, non vires, non discentis ingenium, quae non alia patiente mundo! Immensum, indubitatum exemplum et falsae artis quam dereliquit Nero . . . .*
- For this no resources, no strength, no capacity for learning were lacking, and what else the world did not allow! There is no proof more immense, and one not to be doubted, of the falseness of the art than Nero's abandonment of it . . . .
- IV. 30.1: Magic as Empire  
*Fraudulentissima artium plurimum in toto terrarum orbe plurimisque saeculis valuit. auctoritatem ei maximam fuisse nemo miretur, quandoquidem sola artium tres alias imperiosissimas humanae mentis complexa in unam se redegit.*
- The most fraudulent of arts has held complete sway throughout the world for many ages. No one should marvel that it has the greatest influence, seeing that it alone, having embraced the three other arts most commanding over the human mind, has made them subject to itself alone.
- Ita possessis hominum sensibus triplici vinculo in tantum fastigii adolevit ut hodieque etiam in magna parte gentium praevaleat et in oriente regum regibus imperet.*
- And so, holding men's senses in a triple bond, magic has grown to such a height that even today it prevails over the majority of peoples and in the East commands the kings of kings.
- V. 30.4: Roman Empire v. Magic  
*Nec satis aestimari potest quantum Romanis debeatur, qui sustulere monstra, in quibus hominem occidere religiosissimum erat, mandi vero etiam saluberrimum.*

---

\* Translations either adapted from Rackham in the Loeb or done by the speaker.

Nor can it sufficiently be measured how much is owed to the Romans who have destroyed these monstrous rites in which it was most religious to kill a man and truly most health-giving to eat one.

- VI. 30.5: To Command the Gods  
*Primumque imperare dis concupivit . . . .*

[Nero] longed before all else to command the gods.

- VII. 2.140: Numa as Roman "Magus"?  
*sacris quibusdam et precationibus vel cogi fulmina vel impetrari*

By certain rites and prayers lightning is either summoned or obtained by request

*a Numa saepius hoc facitatum*

This was often practiced by Numa

- VIII. 2.141: Magic or Science?  
*imperare naturae sacra audacis est credere, nec minus hebetis beneficiis abrogare vires, quando in fulgurum quoque interpretatione eo profecit scientia ut ventura alia finito die praecinat . . . innumerabilibus . . . publicis privatisque experimentis.*

It is presumptuous to believe that rites control nature, and no less obtuse to deny power to their services, since in the interpretation of lightning flashes too knowledge has made such progress that it predicts others will come at a fixed time . . . through numberless experiments both public and private.

- IX. Pr. 25-26: Pliny's Foil, Apion  
*Apion quidem grammaticus (hic quem Tiberius Caesar cymbalum mundi vocabat, quom propriae famae tympanum potius videri posset) immortalitate donari a se scripsit ad quos aliqua componebat.*

Indeed the grammaticus Apion (the person whom Tiberius Caesar used to call the world's cymbal, though he could rather seem to be the drum of his own reputation) wrote that those to whom he had dedicated his writings were gifted with immortality by him.

- X. 30.2.9: Philosophy and Magic  
*Certe Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Plato ad hanc descendam navigavere exiliis verius quam peregrinationibus susceptis, hanc reversi praedicavere, hanc in arcanis habuere.*

Certainly Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Plato traveled by sea to learn this art, having undertaken a kind of exile instead of a journey, and, when they returned home, they extolled it and considered it among their secret teachings.

- XI. Thrasyllus and Balbillus, Astrologers
1. Suet. *Tib.* 14: *Thrasyllum quoque mathematicum, quem ut sapientiae professorem contubernio admoverat . . .*
  2. Suet. *Gaius* 19: *quod Thrasyllus mathematicus anxio de successore Tiberio*
  3. Suet. *Nero* 36: *anxius ea re, ut ex Balbillo astrologo didicit . . .*
- XII. Balbillus in Seneca, *Natural Questions* 4A 13  
*Balbillus, virorum optimus perfectusque in omni litterarum genere rarissime*
- Balbillus, the best of men and exceptionally learned in every kind of literature
- XIII. 30.6: Nero and the Magi  
*Magus ad eum Tiridates venerat Armeniacum de se triumphum adferens et ideo provinciis gravis. . . Magos secum adduxerat, magicis etiam cenis eum initiaverat, non tamen, cum regnum ei daret, hanc ab eo artem accipere valuit.*
- To him the magus Tiridates had come with Armenia leading a triumph over himself, and therefore burdensome on the provinces. . . He had brought with him the magi, and had initiated Nero in the magian banquets; and although Nero gave Tiridates a kingdom, Nero for all that did not learn the art of magic from Tiridates.

#### Select Bibliography

- Baldwin, B., "Notes on Pliny's Preface," *Latomus* 64.1 (2005) 91-95
- Cornell, T. J., *The Fragments of the Roman Historians*, 3 vols (OUP, 2014)
- Crippa, S., "Magic and Rationality in Pliny: Transmission of Knowledge: The Medical-Magical Pharmacopoiea," *Palamedes* 5 (2010) 115-25
- Damon, C., "Pliny on Apion," in R. K. Gibson and R. Morello (eds), *Pliny the Elder: Themes and Contexts* (Brill, 2011) 111-46
- Dickie, M., *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (Routledge, 2001)
- Luke, T. S., "Pliny the Elder on Pythagoras," *PLLS* 16 (2016) 285-314
- Meggitt, J. J., "Did magic matter?: the saliency of magic in the early Roman Empire," *JAH* 1.2 (2013), 170-229
- Sordi, M., "Nerone e la Roma neroniana nelle *Historiae* di Plinio il Vecchio," *Neronia* VI (Latomus, 2002) 143-49