

Pliny's Poisonous Provinces: Poison, Foreigners, and *Imperium* in the *Naturalis Historia*

Recent scholarship has shown that the *Naturalis Historia* is not merely a list of entries and scattered anecdotes but represents a complete work of literature with a mission to promote the glory of the Roman empire. Trevor Murphey in particular argues that the encyclopedia format mirrors that of the Roman triumph, showcasing the conquests of the *imperium*. Using his reading, I address tensions Mary Beagon has found between admiration for foreign learning (in particular Greek medicine) and Roman superiority, showing that the the more dangerous the foreign substance, the greater a coup its capture is to the Roman empire.

Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* mentions a number of poisonous substances and their antidotes. Many of these items are linked to specific areas of the Mediterranean, and there are distinct clusters of poisons in regions that once threatened Rome, but were later incorporated into the *Imperium*: Greece, Egypt, North Africa, and Pontus. I will argue that in the *Naturalis Historia* Pliny sets up Italy as a natural antidote to poisons from foreign sources, thus legitimizing the *pax Romana* as the natural regulator of the world.

When poisons are mentioned in the *Naturalis Historia* it is often in a political context where Romans are threatened by foreigners, some of whom are political as well as toxicological threats. For instance, an Egyptian physician prescribes *cantharides* internally rather than topically and ends up killing a Roman *eques* (29.30), and Cleopatra VII threatens Antonius with a poisoned chaplet in order to prove the extent of her hold over the Roman general (21.9). In North Africa, the Psylli, whom Herodotos claimed had all died out, were alive, well, and actively transporting venomous creatures into Italy for their own (unspecified) ends (11.30). Pontus has a poisonous honey that is mentioned numerous times over the course of the *historia*, and is also home to poison-drinking ducks from whom Mithradates learned to immunize himself. Mithradates and Cleopatra VII are both the last rulers of their countries, conquered by Rome in famous victories after complicated and long-waged campaigns, and both of them are infamous both as poisoners and as anti-Roman archetypes.

Against these foreign pro-poison powers is Rome, whose laws and history indicate a pattern of particular opposition to poison-based murder and assassination. From the *Lex Cornelia de Sicariis et veneficiis* (Institutes IV. 18.5), to the story of Fabricius' refusal to accept the services of a physician-poisoner against an enemy of Rome (Eutropius 14), it is clear that the use of poison was an un-Roman activity that used trickery and deceit in lieu of open force in combat. Not only that, but Italy itself is painted as a nullifier of poison (11.30). Pliny emphasizes the presence of unusual poisons and poison-related practices to enhance his pro-Roman message. All of these areas were uniquely positioned to conquer Rome through the un-Roman medium of poison, but were unable to overcome Roman might and succumbed to Roman

domination. As provinces, their poisons serve as spoils of war enriching Roman medicine and stand as testimony to the superiority of the Roman military and political systems.

Bibliography

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