

The Fish That Foretold the Assassination of Caligula: On the *remora* in Pliny's *Natural History*

In Book 32 of the *Natural History*, the Elder Pliny describes an omen that preceded the assassination of Caligula. While sailing from Astura to Antium, the emperor found his ship brought to a halt by a legendary fish known as the *echeneis* (Watson 2010). Ancient sources held that the small sucking fish—called the *remora* in Latin—could arrest the motion of a ship by attaching itself to the hull (Arist. *Hist. an.* 505b18-20; Ov. *Hal.* 99). Marveling at its ability to withstand winds, waves, oars, and rams, Pliny writes that it tamed the madness of the world through adhesion alone (*domat mundi rabiem ... adhaerendo*, HN 32.2). In proof of its powers, he cites a story from his own lifetime (*nostra memoria*, HN 32.4). In the early days of 41 CE, the *remora* clung to the helm (*gubernaculum*) of Caligula's quinquereme, stranding him at sea in an embarrassing challenge to his imperial authority. The incident proved portentous (*auspicalis pisciculus*), for he was assassinated soon after his return to Rome (*novissime tum in urbem reversus ille imperator suis telis confossus est*, HN 32.4). A little fish is thereby assigned a big role in the sequence of events that preceded Caligula's downfall.

I argue that Pliny's narration of this story exploits the symbolic capacities of the ship of state in Roman political thought. Comparisons between polities and ships went back to the Archaic Greek world and were commonplace in Rome by the first century BCE. Republican writers often figured the senate as the *gubernaculum rei publicae*, while individual senators played the role of *gubernatores* (Mebane 2022). Metaphors of pilotage were subsequently incorporated into the burgeoning language of Imperial panegyric, where they were used to explain and celebrate the transition to sole rule (Manolaraki 2008). As Augustus became a paradigmatic pilot (Vitr. 1.1; Val. Max. 9.15.5; Philo *Leg.* 149), however, his successors began to

suffer in comparison. Seneca suggested that Caligula plunged Rome into the sea (*Polyb.* 13.2), while Philo accused him of steering the ship of state astray (*Leg.* 50). Pliny himself portrayed the downfall of Nero as a descent into the stormy waters of civil war (*iactatum procellis rei publicae*, *HN* 3.30). This tradition rendered the seafaring of the Caesars a matter of political as much as practical significance in Imperial literature.

By usurping the helm of Caligula's ship, the *remora* literalized the loss of power that awaited him in Rome. Pliny underscores this point by contrasting the experience of Caligula to that of his great-grandfather, noting that the same fish helped Augustus at the Battle of Actium. Attaching itself to the hull of Antony's ship, it caused a delay that allowed the Caesarian fleet to strengthen its attack (*HN* 32.3). The *remora*'s support of a good *princeps* throws its obstruction of a bad one into sharp relief. This reading becomes richer if we recall that Caligula publicized his descent from Antony, forbidding the celebration of Actium (Suet. *Calig.* 23.1; Dio 59.20.1). Although there is good reason to doubt that he was serious in his self-styling as Antony's heir (Barrett 2015: 291), a source tradition nevertheless arose that assigned him the role of an Antonian despot rather than Augustan *princeps* (Winterling 2011: 78). When Pliny identifies Antony and Caligula as the two victims of the *remora*, he reinforces the parallel. In both cases, nautical failure anticipates political defeat. In this way, Pliny uses a legendary fish to engage with questions of political significance in Imperial Rome.

Works Cited

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