

## Nero and Imperial Historiography in Pliny's *Natural History*

As one might expect of an author who has dedicated his work to the son of Vespasian, Pliny the Elder's portrait of the last of the Julio-Claudian emperors was especially bleak (Wilkes 1972). Nevertheless, Pliny is an important historical source for the reign of Nero, as he both lived through Nero's reign and wrote a history of Nero's time. Pliny's history of magic in Book XXX of the *Natural History* provides the reader, among other things, a surprisingly detailed account of Nero's investigation of magic (Dickie 2003; Doody 2013). One of the more surprising elements of this account is the comparatively positive light Pliny sheds on Nero's abilities. Pliny acknowledges Nero's mental capacity for carrying on the work of a proper investigation of magic, a concession that deserves further notice as it complements other depictions of the emperor as a technology enthusiast.

Pliny's acknowledgment of Nero's intelligence nevertheless cuts against other tropes regarding Nero—for example, his reliance on Seneca's speechwriting abilities—and raises questions about Pliny's handling of Nero in his history *a fine Bassi*. Is it possible that Pliny provided more balance in his portrait of Nero in his history? Or is it the case that the character of the *Natural History* and its subject matter allowed Pliny to account for a side of the emperor that did not find a place in his historical writing? Nero's competence as a scientist seems to be a separate question in Pliny's mind from Nero's quality as an emperor. This paper will argue that Pliny's portrait of Nero the scientist is aimed partly at Titus, the son of Vespasian, who, as the dedicatee of the *Natural History* (Morello 2011), was in the author's aspiration Pliny's student in scientific methodology. Nero serves as a counter example that Pliny uses to bring Titus into his camp as part of a larger project of establishing legitimacy through imagined intellectual-social networks.

## Bibliography

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