

similarly critical attitude to Fehling's ideas of Herodotus' supreme creative licence in shaping his *Histories*. Blösel reviews the available evidence for the influence of local Athenian traditions and family partisanship in Herodotus' text.

According to the book's list of contents, Josef Wiesehöfer's article 'Herodot und ein persisches Hellas' is the sole occupant of the section 'Herodot und die Nachbarn der Griechen', which seems more like box-ticking than anything else. That said, the article itself is very fascinating indeed, juxtaposing Herodotus' textual construction of the Persian plans for the conquest of Greece with the epigraphic evidence and testimonies in other writers. The question goes right to the heart of the Greek creation, in the decades following the Persian Wars, of the existentialist danger represented by the Achaemenid empire, and a literary work putting as much weight upon the moralizing debates about *hubris* and tyranny as the *Histories* does will by necessity be a very challenging source for Persian *realpolitik* – yet it is at the same time quite clear that the Achaemenids projected an impressively articulated rhetorical stance about their world-domination. Before Föllinger's closing words, Arbogast Schmidt explores whether Aristotelian literary theory and philosophy of history might offer new ways of understanding Herodotus' project, with convincing results.

Both of these books will enrich a Herodotean scholar's (or a generalist's, for that matter) conception of the fluctuating viewpoints and partisan narratives that became crystallized, through Herodotus' far-from-innocent shaping process, into one of the most influential literary works of any ancient genre.

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THOMAS R. LAEHN: *Pliny's Defense of Empire*. Routledge, New York – Abingdon 2013. ISBN 978-0-415-81850-6. XV, 152 pp. GBP 110.

The title of Thomas Laehn's book has a certain instinctive plausibility. We expect Pliny the Elder to emerge as a passionate defender of the Roman Empire – even if this is only because the findings of several excellent studies from the previous couple of decades have preconditioned us to think so – yet not only so. Mary Beagon (1992: *Roman Nature: the Thought of Pliny the Elder*), Trevor Murphy (2004, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History: the Empire in Encyclopaedia*), and Valérie Naas (2002: *Le projet encyclopédique de Pline l'ancien*) – the last of the three left unconsulted by Laehn – all grappled with Pliny's compilatory strategies, authority-building, and nature/culture division in order to contextualize his thinking not only about the human animal, but also about what he saw as the greatest and most providential 'empire of knowledge' created by humans. Aude Doody, Katherine Clarke and many others have studied topics expanding our knowledge of the intellectual forebears and inheritors of Pliny, and helped foster an extraordinary quickening of interest in the *Natural History*.

Reinforced as we are with such a wealth of nuanced recent scholarship, it is with a jolt of disbelief that one reads Laehn characterize the "contemporary Plinian scholarship" as "dominated by an image of Pliny as an inept and neurotic compiler of facts and prodigies" (5). Incidentally, the endnote to this claim does not give any concrete examples to back the allegation up, but gestures

vaguely at a "renewed interest in Pliny" (103). One can see where Laehn is heading, though: a proclamation of his intention to "redeem" Pliny as one of the "great thinkers of antiquity" and *Natural History* as "a first-rate work of political philosophy" (5). Plinian scholars might be justified, on the basis of just the 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion: Pliny's Redemption' to complain about a misrepresentation of both their efforts and the scholarship's current attitudes. It soon becomes clear, of course, that Laehn is not primarily addressing classical scholars or ancient historians. His book is aimed at a broader audience, with a particular reference to the historians of political thought, and it is published in Routledge's series on innovations in political theory. This is not an excuse, but perhaps an explanation.

That Pliny is truly innovative in his apology for Roman imperialism remains one of Laehn's crucial claims. Can such a slim volume do justice to the whole weight of the question? This, one supposes, has much to do with how we define 'innovativeness', and immediately opens several caveats about anachronism. The list-form and cataloguing practices, in particular, are understandably crucial to understanding Pliny's text, but Laehn perhaps simplifies our options regarding what we can tell about Pliny's quality as a writer and thinker on the basis of them (31). An encyclopaedic catalogue always has more than one way of succeeding (or failing), and our ideas about how an ancient literary list works should remain relatively free from contemporary expectations. When speaking about the 516 population groups of North Africa (*nat.* 5.3.29), Pliny never intended to name all of them – nor did he expect his audience to demand such a full disclosure from himself – but his reference to the possibility of enumerating them all, and the mention of their exact number, is still vital to his authorial posture. The imperial knowledge-ordering comes close to the surface in textual environments such as this. Similarly, the subjects of the Empire need not be numbered exactly, but it is vital to know that there are many of them. It is perhaps not very surprising that most encyclopaedic projects (from Pliny to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) have stemmed from imperial contexts, as a recent reviewer of a translation of al-Nuwayri's *Nihayat al-arab fi funūn al-adab* has observed (Anna Della Subin, *London Review of Books* 30 Nov 2017, p. 36).

One of Laehn's crucial suggestions in terms of understanding Plinian knowledge-ordering is that the arrangement of *Natural History* shows an 'annular' structure, where the subject matter of the work progresses through its first half, explaining the natural world, and then doubles back to explicate the relationship of the natural things to human civilization. The alleged 'spiraliform' structure of *nat.* 7.191–215, crucial to Laehn's broader claim for compositional annularity, has much to do with the ancient ideas about the technological and cultural progress of humankind, resulting in a list-form catalogue of innovations. It would thus have been useful for Laehn to discuss other authors who before Pliny or contemporaneously with him were articulating similar civilizational schemas, such as Lucretius and Pompeius Trogus (whose account of the early civilizations, partially preserved in Justin's *Epitome*, contains comparable reflections on social and cultural inventions). Another useful parallel, left unexplored but one that could have helped Laehn contextualize and even question his 'Plinian exceptionalism', would have been Pomponius Mela's literary circumambulation of a labyrinthine world, which forms one of the basic organizational structures of his *De situ orbis*.

What this reviewer found convincing and interesting is Laehn's emphasis on Pliny's conception of 'human' not being wholly consistent with rationality alone (36–56). Instead, he argues that even if 'the Plinian Human' (surely we should leave behind the formulation 'Plinian Man?') is clearly

a creature apart from all the others engendered by Nature, humanity and the non-human elide into each other both in the thaumatographic fringes of the world and some of the more advanced kinds of beasts. Yet even here, the book has too little space to dwell on the ethnographical tradition to make full sense of Pliny's position in it, and the possible implications of that regarding his uniqueness. Overall, Laehn's interpretation of Pliny's encyclopaedic programme is often fairly one-dimensional, and frequently needs to read Pliny as meaning wholly and only what he says: the image conjured up is that of an earnest Pliny devoid of any irony or capability to insinuate complexities and ambiguities into his discussion of civilization and power (e.g. 38). This, in fact, is what would make Pliny a true outlier in his own intellectual and literary context.

The *Natural History* seems to entertain a certain ideal of public service and 'philanthropic spirit' (4, on the basis of Mary Beagon), but this is not an ideal that the whole of humankind equally deserves. Some peoples are beyond Rome's grace, according to Pliny, such as the wretched Germanic groups of the Frisian coast who dare to call their miserable existence outside the Empire 'freedom' (*nat.* 16,1–6). And even though Pliny clearly does envision nature to have been created for humanity, and humanity for the sake of perfecting nature (52), it is a very specific kind of human that Pliny is envisioning – and it is here that the book reaches some genuinely new ground. The topic promised by its title, Pliny's defence of this particular kind of humanity – the *animal imperiale* (70) – is taken up relatively late in the volume, in Chapter 3 (57–99). Even so, the discussion of the overall subject, with a couple of auxiliary viewpoints – the 'depoliticization of space' in the Roman empire, and Pliny's conscious pitch of having created a new literary form for a new age – is stimulating and offers many suggestions that complement other recent works of Plinian scholarship.

It is well known that *Natural History* is addressed to Titus during his sixth consulship. Since its official recipient was the likely next emperor, it might have been worthwhile to raise the question of whether Pliny's text can be interpreted as participating in the 'mirror of the princes' tradition. Any possible utilitarian posture of *Natural History* as a prospective emperor's erudite companion to understanding the world – a stance that even less voluminous works of technical literature adopted – is left unexamined in the book, which is a pity. Overall, the heart of Laehn's book, its third chapter, is a useful take on Pliny's thinking about imperial rule and civilization. But the book is also marred by its combative ungenerosity towards preceding scholarship, as well as its special pleading in the case of Pliny's exceptionalism – a claim that cannot be reliably demonstrated within the scope of such a slim study, or at all. Laehn's interpretations are vigorous and thought-provoking, but often they flatten Pliny's encyclopaedic project onto a single plane, which does a disservice to a work which – by virtue of both its generic choices and ideals, as well as its author's own varied interests – gloried in the multiplicity of the world and toyed knowingly with the dichotomy between the impossibility of a 'total representation' and the encyclopaedist's rhetorical promise of providing exactly that.