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Dating By African Figs

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On the African fig, Pliny the Elder tells us, *De Africanis ... magna quaestio est, cum id genus in Africam nuperrime transierit* (NH 15.69). It has been suggested that here Pliny is informing us about an Italian fig taken to Africa during Vespasian's principate, an idea whose dating depends upon our knowing what Pliny meant by 'nuperrime'¹. "In Pliny's work", we are told, "*nuperrime* is rare; but in two places (NH 14.54 and 19.12, cf. 37.37), it is dated by its context. In both cases *nuperrime* means *Vespasiano principe*"². Clearly we must look again at Pliny's usage to see if this suggestion is plausible.

There are five other examples of the word in the NH:

- (i) 7.9, *Indicavimus ... nuperrime trans Alpīs hominem immolari gentium earum more solitum*

Rabenhorst has tried to argue that the whole of Book 7 is little more than a series of plagiarised extracts from Flaccus's *Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium Libri*, and that this passage in particular does not make sense unless it be dated to the reign of Tiberius³. One of the principal arguments for this notion seems to be that Book 7's *exempla* do not go further forward in date than the reign of Tiberius, particularly those *exempla* in the latter part of the Book. But it is not difficult to show that this view is mistaken. Note the following references –

- (a) *Claudius Caesar scribit ... nos principatu eius vidimus* (35),
- (b) *Gaium ... Domitium Neronem principes* (45),
- (c) *Neronem ... toto principatu suo hostem generis humani* (46),
- (d) *M. Silvanum, qui cum Asiam obtineret post consulatum Neronis principis successione* (58),
- (e) *Divo Claudio principe* (74),
- (f) *Fonteio et Vipstano coss* (84) = 59 AD,
- (g) *Tiridatem ... quem Nero [for thirteen million sesterces] manumisit* (129),
- (h) *Nuper L. Volusius Saturninus* (156) = died in 56 AD⁴,
- (i) *Claudio principe* (158),

1 Naiditch: *Hermes* 105 (1977) 249–251.

2 Naiditch: *op. cit.* 251, note 6.

3 *Der ältere Plinius als Epitomator des Verrius Flaccus* (Berlin 1907) 118 and 31–32. His arguments were accepted, more or less *in toto*, by Schilling, the editor of the Budé edition of Book 7. See his 'Introduction', xv–xvi.

4 See the Budé note *ad* 7.62.

- (j) *Claudius Caesar consulatu suo quarto* (159) = 51 AD,
- (k) *Censum Claudii Caesaris* (159) = 47–48 AD,
- (l) *Census quem intra quadriennium imperatores Caesares Vespasiani pater filiusque censores egerunt* (162) = 73–74 AD⁵.

Now, unless one is going to argue that all twelve references must be later interpolations, the argument that Book 7 is little more than a plagiarism or epitome of Verrius Flaccus will not hold water. One may also note further that Pliny does not mention Flaccus until (180). Of course, it could be argued that Pliny does not always name his sources even though they are acknowledged in Book 1 – Alexander Polyhistor is a prime example – but then one is left to explain why Pliny should have chosen to use Flaccus without acknowledgement until (180) when due acknowledgement does take place. The argument is not a happy one.

Pliny's *nuperrime*, in fact, is probably his own word, rather than a word from whatever source material he had in front of him at the time, and seems to be fulfilling a function of contrast between 'very long ago' and 'very recently'. The Scythian cannibals he has mentioned just before 'indicavimus' and the Cyclopes and Laestrygones just before the Alpine tribes, go back to Herodotus and Homer. So any examples of cannibals or human sacrifice coming from any time within the first century AD could be described as *nuperrime* in simple contrast.

- (ii) 14.54, *Cum Mucianus ter consul ex iis qui nuperrime prodidere*, etc.

On the face of it, this looks as though one might date *nuperrime* by the reference to Mucianus's third consulship (29th May–July/September, 72 AD), but one must also bear in mind that Pliny's reference is made by way of contrast with information explicitly derived from Homer, *Maroneum ... miscendum Homerus prodidit*, and *Mucianus ... praesens in eo tractu*, etc. (both of them recording a difference in the proportion of wine in water).

- (iii) 19.12, *Nuperrime prodidit Mucianus ter cos*

Again we find a contrast between the very distant and the very recent. A linen breastplate belonging to one of the Kings of Egypt can be seen in the Temple of Minerva on Lindos: Mucianus examined it. What makes this reference especially ambiguous is the relationship between *nuperrime* and *prodidit*. If *nuperrime* belongs to the accompanying Accusative and Infinitive clause, it is part of Mucianus's text. If it goes with *prodidit*, it belongs to Pliny.

5 Note also a reference to *Aviola consularis* (173). The Budé note goes in for special pleading at this point, arguing that *consularis* must be wrong because it does not appear in Valerius Maximus who used Verrius Flaccus as a source, neither of whom could have known about the honour; and, as Pliny was dependent on Flaccus, he must be referring to *Aviola père* who is not regarded as consul. The argument is unconvincing since it depends on accepting Rabenhorst's proposition and that, as my twelve examples show, is probably mistaken.

In the latter case, *nuperrime* can be dated to the mid-seventies. In the former, it could belong to any time in the fifties or sixties.

(iv) 36.145, *Haec est sententia eorum qui nuperrime scripsere*

There is no indication in the section preceding this sentence of who these writers were, and the next section begins with a reference to *vetustissimi auctores*. So the process of contrast between ‘now’ and ‘then’ is what *nuperrime* illustrates here. No dating is possible.

(v) 37.37, *Xenocrates ... qui de his nuperrime scripsit, vivitque adhuc*

The identity of this Xenocrates – *pace* the editorial notes *ad locum* in the Loeb and Budé editions both of which, in any case, are in disagreement – is not at all certain. Nor, unfortunately, is that of the ‘Theochrestus’ with whose view on amber, according to Pliny, Xenocrates concurred. If the observations about the contrasting function of *nuperrime* hold good for this example as they did for the previous four, the most one can say is that Theochrestus would have lived considerably earlier than the Vespasianic period.

Now, with these five examples in mind, what can one say about 15.69? Contrast there is, certainly. Pliny has just been mentioning figs which *ad nos ex aliis transiere gentibus* and then goes on to the so-called *African*, stating that *id genus in Africam ... transierit*. But whether he means to imply that the earlier figs came into Italy a long time before Italy exported this particular brand to Africa is not altogether clear. What we can say, however, is that *nuperrime* does not date the transition as unmistakably as Naiditch would like. Six examples of Pliny’s usage, including the one under discussion, are too few to create reliable dating information. Moreover, the examples themselves largely fail to bear out what Naiditch is suggesting. Neither 7.9 nor 36.145 can be dated accurately; 14.54, despite its reference to Mucianus’s third consulship, simply includes him with other ‘recent’ writers who are contrasted with the very ancient writer, Homer. 19.12 may belong to the seventies but could equally well belong to an earlier decade; and 37.37 is ambiguous in a way similar to 14.54. In consequence, 15.69 turns out to be more or less undatable after all.