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FIRMUS AND THE CROCODILES REVISITED: PARADOXOGRAPHY AND THE *HISTORIA AUGUSTA*'S *LIFE OF THE FOUR TYRANTS*[*]

Abstract: This article reassesses the *Historia Augusta*'s *Vita Quadrigae Tyrannorum* as a source for paradoxographical allusions in the collection. Prior studies have noted occasional intertexts to Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* in the *Vita*, but the thematic and structural significance of the author's engagement with Plinian and paradoxographical miscellany has been largely overlooked. As this article illustrates, identifying the *Vita*'s Plinian and paradoxographical intertexts is key to understanding the author's characterisation of his last pseudonymous narrator, 'Flavius Vopiscus', and allows for a reexamination of the author's unusual interest in usurpation at a critical juncture at the closure of the series.

Keywords: *Historia Augusta*, Pliny the Elder, biography, paradoxography, Egypt, Imperial History

Within the thirty imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta*, humorous intertexts often trump historical fact. Though long famed as a 'forgery' which aimed to deceive gullible readers into accepting its invented documents and false attribution to six Tetrarchic biographers at face value, growing recognition of the *Historia Augusta*'s intertextuality has led to greater appreciation for the collection's literary merits in recent decades.[1] Despite lingering questions concerning its authorship and dating, the *Historia Augusta* is now best interpreted as the sophisticated literary expression of a single, anonymous author who aimed to challenge and amuse a select audience of knowledgeable readers in the late fourth century CE.[2] For these

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[1] On the collection's *Quellenforschung* and intertextuality, see Barnes (1978); Birley (2002); Rohrbacher (2013), (2016); den Hengst (2021). For older approaches that emphasised its deception, see Syme (1968) 176–202, (1971a) 12–16.

[2] Efforts to 'unmask' the collection's fraudulence and identify its author and timeframe have encompassed more than a century of scholarship. For summaries of these efforts, see Cameron (2011) 743–78; Thomson (2012) 20–53; Rohrbacher (2016) 3–8, 153–69; Savino (2017) 1–58; Stover and Kestemont (2016).

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attentive readers, the biographies' rampant intertextuality and subversions of biographical convention were not historical travesties but instead literary games, a false veneer through which they could see a reflection of their own scholarly endeavours.[3]

These allusive and self-reflective qualities are flaunted throughout the collection but become increasingly dominant in the final five biographies dedicated to rulers and usurpers from Aurelian through Carinus (*r.* 270–85 CE). Attributed to 'Flavius Vopiscus', the last of the author's six pseudonymous *alter egos*, these final five lives are often identified as the least reliable and most inventive biographies in the entire collection.[4] Though less helpful from a historical perspective, the high quantity of invented materials in these lives makes them one of the best opportunities to detect the author's allusive games and methodological parodies. Indeed, due to the frequency of programmatic statements and authorial asides in these lives, 'Vopiscus' has been recognised as the narratorial voice most closely aligned with the anonymous author, making explorations into these lives particularly valuable.[5]

This pattern holds true for the penultimate *Vita Quadrigae Tyrannorum* or *Life of the Four Tyrants*, the main object of our study. Ostensibly a joint biography of four usurpers who rebelled against Aurelian and Probus, the *Vita*'s factual justification is sparse. One quarter of the life is devoted to extracts of imperial edicts, inscriptions, and correspondence, but these documents, like others throughout the collection, have proven to be false.[6] The historicity of the four usurpers is also dubious. Three—Saturninus, Proculus, and Bonosus—are attested elsewhere as usurpers under Probus, but details concerning their rebellions are manipulated in the *Historia Augusta* to be almost unrecognisable.[7] Corroboration for the fourth usurper Firmus, who is discussed in the longest and most elaborate biography at the outset of the life, is even more tenuous. According to 'Vopiscus', Firmus rebelled against Aurelian in Alexandria in

[3] On the *Historia Augusta* as a self-conscious reflection for sophisticated readers, see Jenkins (2006) 138–45; Horsfall (2009) 58–63; Pausch (2010), (2011); Rohrbacher (2016), esp. 69–86; Van Nuffelen (2017) 180–7; Zinsli (2017) 150; Kemezis (2018); Langenfeld (2023).

[4] Syme (1968) 55–6; Cameron (2011) 778–82; Thomson (2012) 72; Rohrbacher (2016) 8–15, 171; Kemezis (2018).

[5] On the narratological similarities and differences in style and interests of the six *faux* biographers, as well as how original readers may have discerned their distribution across the lives, see den Hengst (1981), (1994); Burgersdijk (2016); Zinsli (2017); and Kemezis (2022). On Vopiscus as a unique literary voice, sometimes conflated with the author, see Syme (1968) 179, (1971a) 249–50; Thomson (2012) 72–3; Zinsli (2017) 137, 143–4.

[6] I.e., *Quad. Tyr.* 5.3–6, 7.2, 8.1–10, 9.4–10.3, 12.7, 15.6–8, 33.5. On the collection's fictive documents, see den Hengst (1987); Jenkins (2006) 138–45; Rohrbacher (2016) 69–72; Langenfeld (2023) 182–3.

[7] *PLRE* I.808, 'Julius Saturninus 12'; *PLRE* I.745, 'Proculus 1'; *PLRE* I.163, 'Bonosus 1'. On the life's fictions, see Barnes (1972) 150–2, 171–2 and more below.

support of Zenobia's Palmyrene cause (*Quad. Tyr.* 2.1–3), but whether a usurper named Firmus claimed imperial power, minting coins as 'Vopiscus' claims, seems doubtful.[8]

Woven throughout this fictive examination of the foes amassing on the edges of the Empire is a parodic pastiche of spurious and fantastical claims, which situate readers in Egypt, Africa, and other far-flung lands on the outskirts of the Roman *oikoumenē*.[9] One of the most famous of these fantastical assertions arises at the conclusion of Firmus' biography. Citing an unknown and likely spurious Aurelius Festivus, Vopiscus reports that Firmus was known for astonishing feats of animal mastery, including that

> Firmum eundem inter crocodillos, unctum crocodillorum adipibus, natasse et elephantum rexisse et hippopotamo sedisse et sedentem ingentibus strutionibus vectum esse et quasi volitasse. (*Quad. Tyr.* 6.2)
>
> Firmus had swum among the crocodiles after smearing himself with crocodiles' fat, driven an elephant, mounted a hippopotamus, and ridden about while sitting upon enormous ostriches so that he seemed to be flying.

Like many of the *Vita*'s idiosyncrasies, scholars have identified intertextual allusion and anti-Christian polemic as the impetus for Firmus' unusual affinity with Nilotic fauna.

R. Syme and S. Ratti, for example, have posited the passage was intended to parody Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony* (15.1) or Rufinus' *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (12.39–56) in which Christian figures swim safely among crocodiles as a miracle of their faith.[10] A. Chastagnol, F. Paschoud, and D. Rohrbacher, among others, have similarly identified critiques of Christian ascetic practices, particularly those promoted by Jerome, as the motivation for unbelievable claims concerning Firmus' and his companions' penchant for alcohol and sexual excesses.[11] Even the title granted to the life, the *Vita Quadrigae Tyrannorum* (*Prob.* 24.7–8), has been interpreted as an allusion to Jerome's application of

[8] The *Vita*'s Firmus is likely an amalgamation of a Claudius Firmus (*PLRE* I.341, 'Claudius Firmus 7') who served as *corrector* in Egypt under Aurelian and another Firmus (*PLRE* I.340, 'Firmus 3') who seems to have rebelled against Valentinian I in 373. See Amm. Marc. 22.16.15; 29.5; Zos. 1.61.1; and Schwartz (1978) 179; Paschoud (1997) 87–9 on the identification.

[9] The concept of a civilised Roman, Italic centre ringed by a barbaric, uncivilised periphery remained potent in late antique imagination; see Humphries (2009) 97–8.

[10] Syme (1968) 83; Ratti (2017) 143–4.

[11] E.g., Chastagnol (1970) 83–6, 96–8, (1976); Paschoud (2002) 279–84; Rohrbacher (2016) 112–8.

the term *quadriga* ('a four-span') to describe groupings of four holy figures or virtues.[12] Of course, for an author who hoped to flaunt his wide reading and engage readers in erudite intertextual games, crafting multivalent or polysemic allusions was not only possible but even desirable.[13] The preponderance of Hieronymian echoes in the *Vita Quadrigae* and the preceding *Vita Probi* suggests that the author was, indeed, familiar with Jerome's writings and that these writings may have inspired some of the *Vita*'s most notable allusive passages.[14]

As this article demonstrates, however, the hunt for Hieronymian echoes and anti-Christian polemic in the *Vita* has led scholars to overlook the other, more dominant intertext of the life: the encyclopaedic and paradoxographical miscellany of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia*. As this article illustrates, the wide popularity of Pliny's *Naturalis historia* and the writings of Pliny's third-century epitomator Gaius Julius Solinus at the time of the *Historia Augusta*'s composition makes the lack of a dedicated study of the two authors' influence on the collection somewhat of a surprise. Prior studies by F. Gilliam, Paschoud, and Rohrbacher, among others, have noted the *Vita*'s occasional allusion to Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, though the tendency to treat these allusions as isolated instances of intertextuality has meant the structural and thematic significance of the *Vita*'s engagement with the *Naturalis historia* and the genre of paradoxography, more generally, has largely been ignored.[15] It is not only Pliny's and Solinus' descriptions of Egyptian crocodile-riders known as the Tentyritae that inform the author's descriptions of Firmus' Nilotic escapades, as scholars like Gilliam and Paschoud have noted.[16] Numerous additional Plinian and paradoxographical intertexts also inspire fantastic claims concerning Firmus' and his companions' physical descriptions, sexual proclivities, penchant for exotic meats, and facilities with alcohol among other matters.

Admittedly, the extensive overlap between Pliny's and Solinus' texts, as well as the broad diffusion of paradoxographical *topoi* in Roman imagination, sometimes complicates efforts to distinguish Pliny or Solinus as the author's

[12] E.g., Hier. *Ep.* 52.13.3, 53.9.2, 66.2. See Paschoud (2000) 179–81; Rohrbacher (2016) 122. However, proper applications of the term's singular and plural forms are locus for discussion in Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* (19.8), a work with which the *Historia Augusta* exhibits numerous intertexts (see n. 32), suggesting alternative possibilities.

[13] Rohrbacher (2016) 21–9; Langenfeld (2023) 189.

[14] Straub (1963) 81–105; Syme (1968) 80–3; Chastagnol (1970) 12–16, 59–98, (1976) 91–112; den Hengst (1981) 63–4, 122–7; Barnes (1991); Paschoud (2000), (2002) 47–9, 275; Rohrbacher (2016) 101–29; *contra* Cameron (2011) 761–70.

[15] E.g., Gilliam (1980) 97–102; Paschoud (1989) 225, (2002) 230; Rohrbacher (2016) 35–6, 118–9; Stickler (2021) 187–91.

[16] Gilliam (1980) 97–102; Paschoud (2002) 224–5, 230.

primary or sole referent.[17] However, as demonstrated below, the presence of shared intertexts between Pliny's *Naturalis historia* and the *Historia Augusta* absent from Solinus' epitomes indicate that the author often referred to the *Naturalis historia* directly for allusive effect. In several cases, these intertexts are unequivocal and clear, featuring verbal similarities and 'clustering of words and phrases found in a source text' that have become the gold standard when identifying examples of intertextual borrowing.[18] Other passages feature a more summative style of reference that suggests the author worked from memory when alluding to the *Naturalis historia*, much as he does with Sallust and other authors,[19] or was drawing interdiscursively upon paradoxographical tropes discussed by Pliny but which had become so diffuse that deliberate verbal parallels were not necessary to conjure the paradoxographical and encyclopaedic discourses with which authors like Pliny and Solinus had become associated.[20]

The result of these Plinian and paradoxographical intertexts is not merely a tired pastiche of trite 'Egyptianising' and other foreign stereotypes as Paschoud, R. Poignault, and other scholars have espoused.[21] Instead, identifying the *Vita*'s Plinian intertexts and interdiscursive paradoxographical appeals are key to understanding the author's characterisation of Vopiscus' scholarly trajectory. As we will see, Vopiscus' embrace of Plinian and paradoxographical minutiae is heralded by Vopiscus' self-designation as a *curiosus* in the *Vita Probi* (2.8), a designation given not only to prurient biographers but also to excessively inquisitive paradoxographers by the author's contemporaries.[22] This designation, along with well-known programmatic statements in the *Vita Aureliani* identifying 'curiosity' (*curiositas*) as a defining methodological framework for Vopiscus' lives, paints the paradoxographical tenor of the *Vita Quadrigae* as the teleological culmination of the obscure minutiae to which Vopiscus' curiosity has led him.[23]

[17] On the unique difficulties involved in detecting intertextual relations between paradoxographical texts, which are predisposed to 'extratextual intermediality' and 'dialogic readings', see Murphy (2004) 77–87; Ash (2018) 128, 145.

[18] Den Hengst (2021) esp. 72–3, 79–80.

[19] Syme (1971b) 36–8; den Hengst (1981) 125; Barnes (1991) 26. Cf. the more expansive understanding of intertextual relations given in Marchesi (2023).

[20] König (2023) 68–71 defines 'interdiscursivity' as the 'the evocation of whole discourse as opposed to individual texts', which 'can play out just as effectively at the macro-level—in the structure, register, overall aesthetics, and generic resemblances of texts—as through minute lexical echoes or narrowly focused allusions'.

[21] Schwartz (1978); Paschoud (1997) 92, (2002) 174–5; Poignault (2001) 256–8.

[22] On the term's paradoxographical connotations, see Schlapbach (2014) and discussion below.

[23] On theme of *curiositas* in Vopiscus' lives, see Sogno (2012); Van Nuffelen (2017) 180–7.

Identifying the *Vita*'s Plinian intertexts and paradoxographical tenor also provides new means of reexamining a key thematic feature—the author's unusual interest in usurpation—at a critical juncture at the closure of the series. As this article argues, the *Vita*'s deliberate interdiscursivity with paradoxographical and geographical conventions even extends to its structural organisation, which evokes the concept of a *periplus* or geographic survey of the seditious forces amassing on the edges of the 'civilised' Roman *oikumenē*.[24] Fittingly, the author begins his *periplus* in Egypt and the adjacent lands of the Near East, two lands traditionally considered by paradoxographers like Pliny and Solinus to be the most wondrous exotic locales, in the lives of Firmus and Saturninus before shifting west and north to the more pedestrian climes of Gaul and Germania for the lives of Proculus and Bonosus.[25] By deliberately conflating Firmus and his companions with the astonishing wonders (*mirabilia*) and marvels (*paradoxa*) thought to inhabit Egypt and other far-flung lands, the author trivialises the threat posed by these uncouth, uncivilised oddities and underscores Aurelian's and Probus' success in pacifying the chaotic forces of the untamed periphery.

Therefore, revealing the Plinian and paradoxographical influences of the *Vita Quadrigae* not only adds to our understanding of the collection's intertextuality and *Quellenforschung*, topics of perennial concern to scholars of the *Historia Augusta*, but also underscores the wide array of literary genres that the author parodies in his simultaneous efforts to entertain readers and provoke deeper rumination on his biographical subjects.

I. Vopiscus, the 'Curious' Biographer

At the time of the *Historia Augusta*'s composition in the late fourth century, interest in paradoxography—the study of astonishing wonders (*mirabilia*) and notable marvels (*paradoxa*)—had captivated ancient imaginations for a millennium.[26] Some authors explicitly embraced the fantastical nature of their subject matter, titling their catalogues 'A Collection of Extraordinary Tales' (Ἱστοριῶν παραδόξων συναγωγή) or 'On Wonders' (*Mirabilia*) to indicate the unbelievable peoples and creatures which they alleged lived on the outskirts of the known world.[27] Others, like Strabo and Pomponius Mela, incorporated

[24] On the structure and its paradoxographical connections, see Murphy (2004) 134–8; Pajón Leyra (2011) 35–8; Brodersen (2015).

[25] On Egypt as a land of comparison, see n. 68.

[26] On the genre's genesis and characteristics, see Romm (1992); Pajón Leyra (2011), esp. 29–129; Kazantzidis (2019) 5–11.

[27] E.g., Antigonus of Carystus' third-century BCE Ἱστοριῶν παραδόξων συναγωγή, and Apollonius Paradoxographus' second-century BCE *Mirabilia*. On these early attestations,

accounts of peculiar people and notable phenomena in self-described scientific or geographic treatises, using systematic geographic excursuses known as *periplı*.[28] Elements of both approaches were adopted by Pliny the Elder when composing his thirty-seven book *Naturalis historia* in the first century CE. Although Pliny describes his subject as 'natural history, that is life' (*praef.* 13 *rerum natura, hoc est vita*), tales of paradoxographical wonders pervade the *Naturalis historia*.[29]

Adopting the frame of a geographic *periplus*, Pliny first describes the geographical marvels of Europe in Books 3 and 4 and those of Africa, Egypt, and Asia in Books 5 and 6. Additional 'prodigies' (*prodigia*) of Nature, including the unusual physiognomy and abilities of peripheral races, then preoccupy Pliny in the highly paradoxographical Book 7, as do tales of wondrous land and sea creatures in Books 8–10. Subsequent books address foreign trees, exotic gemstones, and medicinal plants among other subjects, but Pliny's interest in wondrous foreign attestations remain a central focus. Though it is now lauded as the work of an encyclopaedist or natural scientist, among ancient audiences the *Naturalis historia*'s discussions of paradoxographical 'prodigies'—particularly those from Book 7 concerning Egypt, Africa, India, and other far-flung lands—became the treatise's most famous and excerpted passages in the second and third centuries.[30]

Pliny's descriptions of foreign marvels are readily detectable in the works of Tacitus, Suetonius, Plutarch, and Pliny the Younger, signalling the encyclopaedia's broad impact on Roman literary production in the generations after its production.[31] Indeed, in the late second century, Aulus Gellius, a known referent for the *Historia Augusta*, declared Pliny to be the only Latin author of note to concern himself with wondrous idiosyncrasies of far distant lands.[32] Complaining that other Latin authors had passed over accounts 'full of marvellous tales, unheard of, incredible things' (*miraculorum fabularumque pleni, res inauditae, incredulae*) without mention, Gellius singles out Pliny as a notable exception, summarising Pliny's descriptions of African and Indian wonders

many of which are fragmentary, and the Hellenistic origins of the genre, see Schepens (1996); Pajón Leyra (2011) 161–5; Lightfoot (2021) 42–57; Schorn (2022) 3–7; and Zucker (2024) 86–8, 103–6.

[28] On Strabo's *Geographika*, see Dueck (2000); Braund (2006); Roller (2014). On Mela, Brodersen (1994); Smith (2016).

[29] On the structure of the *Naturalis historia* and its encyclopaedic and paradoxographical tenor, see Murphy (2004) 5–7, 29–48; Beagon (2005) 18–30, 40–8; König and Woolf (2013a) 39–43.

[30] Murphy (2004) 7–16; Doody (2010) 1–10, 22, 27; Naas (2011); Pajón Leyra (2011) 170–1.

[31] García Moreno (1992); Shannon-Henderson (2013); Ash (2018).

[32] On the author's Gellian intertexts, see Rohrbacher (2016) 69–72; Langenfeld (2023) 188–92.

and praising the author for recording marvels that he had personally seen (*NA* 9.4.1–16).[33]

By the late fourth century, copies and extracts of the *Naturalis historia* continued to circulate among those of scholarly persuasion.[34] Symmachus reports sending a copy of the *Naturalis historia* to Ausonius (*Ep.* 1.24), and Augustine also exhibits direct knowledge of Pliny's text.[35] Readers overwhelmed by the expanse of Pliny's endeavour could also turn to the two late third- or early fourth-century epitomes written by Gaius Iulius Solinus. The first of these treatises was known as the *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium*, which Solinus later revised and reissued in a second edition titled the *Polyhistor*.[36] Although Solinus never mentions Pliny or Mela by name, estimates suggest as much as one-half or two-thirds of Solinus' treatises are due to direct borrowing from Mela's *Chorographia* or Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, especially from Pliny's paradoxographical Book 7 which Solinus adopts nearly wholesale.[37] Like Pliny, Solinus' treatises remained popular reading in the fourth century CE and beyond.[38] Ammianus, Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Servius reveal clear engagement with Solinus' epitomes if not also some familiarity with Pliny's *Naturalis historia* itself.[39]

This broad diffusion of Pliny's and Solinus' texts ensured the *Historia Augusta*'s author and audience had many points of contact with paradoxographical writing in general and the writings of Pliny and Solinus in particular. Indeed, for a bibliophilic author with a documented penchant for parodying popular literature, it is unsurprising that allusions to Pliny's and Solinus' works would leave their mark on the *Historia Augusta*, particularly in the later lives where the author's engagement with an array of genres has

[33] Latin text from Rolfe (1927) 162.

[34] On the work's transmission and manuscript tradition, see Murphy (2004) 210; Beagon (2005) 37–8; and Brodersen (2015) 299.

[35] Beagon (2005) 35–8; Schlapbach (2014) 144–5.

[36] On Solinus' work and its classification as chorographic, encyclopaedic paradoxography, see Brodersen (2011) 63–7, (2014), (2015) 303–4; Pajón Leyra (2011) 171–2; Romer (2014) 75–7.

[37] Romer (2014) 75; Brodersen (2015) 305–6. For a contrasting minority view, see Hillard (2014) who argues for a greater degree of independence in Solinus' corpus.

[38] Brodersen (2011) 63–4, 67–70, (2015) 299–304. Bede had access to Pliny's work in the ninth century; see Beagon (2005) 35–6.

[39] Paniagua (2014); Schlapbach (2014) 147–50. Some, following Mommsen, have theorised Ammianus' paradoxographical knowledge came from a lost intermediary known as the *Chorographia Pliniana*; see Hillard (2014) 56–61. However, Brodersen (2015) 303–6 argues an intermediary is unnecessary and that Ammianus' source is either Pliny or Solinus. On paradoxographical tropes in Jerome and Eusebius, see Merrills (2004) 217–21.

already been detected.[40] Traces of these Plinian influences arise long before the *Vita Quadrigae*. Miscellaneous references to Alexandrian fig trees, Arabian stones, and pearls owned by Cleopatra in the *Vita Alexandri Severi* and *Vita Triginta Tyrannorum* reveal the author's familiarity with the obscure, foreign *luxuria* described throughout Pliny's compendium.[41] However, these Plinian influences come to their fullest expression in the series of five lives attributed to 'Flavius Vopiscus'.[42]

Proof of Vopiscus' burgeoning interest in paradoxographical minutiae initially arises in the *Vita Aureliani*, the first life assigned to the pseudonymous biographer. There, Vopiscus exhibits an interest in foreign purple dyes, a topic described at length in the *Naturalis historia*, when discussing (undoubtedly invented) Persian heraldry and headdresses that had been gifted to Aurelian following Zenobia's defeat.[43] Supposedly, the items were dyed in such a wondrous shade of purple that no Roman had ever beheld its like again (*Aur.* 28.5). Acknowledging that a discussion of the dye's origin is a digression from his primary biographical endeavour, Vopiscus reports that Aurelian, Probus, and Diocletian had been so entranced with the heraldry's purple lustre that they had conducted searches for the species of purple to no avail (29.1–30.1). Vopiscus, however, easily identifies the dye as Indian sandyx when properly prepared (29.3). Clearly, had Aurelian or Diocletian been as persistent and curious a reader of Pliny's description of the dye in the *Naturalis historia* (*HN* 35.40) as Vopiscus, their searches would have proven more successful.

Readers can also detect Vopiscus' mind straying to the periphery in the subsequent *Vita Taciti*. In a famed but spurious prophecy, the author (in the guise of Vopiscus) reports that soothsayers foretold an emperor,

> qui det iudices Parthis ac Persis, qui Francos et Alamannos sub Romanis legibus habeat, qui per omnem Africam barbarum non relinquat, qui Taprobanis praesidem inponat, qui ad Iuvernam insulam proconsulem mittat, qui Sarmatis omnibus iudicet, qui terram omnem, qua Oceano

[40] On the later lives' novelistic and panegyrical tendencies, see Pausch (2010), (2011); Burgersdijk (2013) 294–312.

[41] *Sev. Alex.* 60.5, cf. *HN* 15.68–70; *Tyr. Trig.* 30.14, cf. *HN* 37.194–5; and *Sev. Alex.* 51.3 and *Tyr. Trig.* 32.5–6, cf. *HN* 9.119–21. See Magie (1921–32) II.300, III.138; Chastagnol (1994) 906; Rohrbacher (2016) 118–19.

[42] As Hohl (1912) 474–82 noted, even the allusive origins of Vopiscus' name may be found in *HN* 7.47, where Pliny identifies 'Vopiscus' as a rare term used to describe a twin whose companion had died in the womb. Common adages suggest the moniker was inspired by the fact that 'Vopiscus' had succeeded 'Trebellius Pollio' as the last of the author's false *alter ego*s to headline the work (see den Hengst (1981) 68–9; Thomson (2012) 74), though the name is more likely inspired by references to Caesar Vopiscus in Cic. *De or.* 2.217–97; see Birley (2002) 44–7; Rohrbacher (2016) 23.

[43] *HN* 9.124–64; 35.30–50; Murphy (2004) 96–8; Pausch (2010) 124.

> ambitur, captis omnibus gentibus suam faciat, postea tamen senatui reddat imperium et antiquis legibus vivat, ipse victurus annis centum viginti et sine herede moriturus. (*Tac.* 15.2)
>
> who would give judges to the Parthians and the Persians, subject the Franks and the Alamanni to the laws of Rome, drive out every barbarian from the whole of Africa, establish a governor at Taprobane, send a proconsul to the island of Iuverna, act as judge to all the Sarmatians, make all the land which borders on the Ocean his own territory by conquering every people, but thereafter restore the power to the senate and conduct himself in accordance with the ancient laws, being destined to live for one hundred and twenty years and to die without an heir.

Unfortunately, Tacitus proves unable to unite such far-flung peoples under a single banner, leaving Rome's quest to pacify Africa, Persia, Gaul, and Germany an aspirational endeavour as the later *Vita Quadrigae* throws into high relief.[44] Moreover, the references to Taprobane and Iuverna (modern-day Sri Lanka and Ireland, respectively) indicate Vopiscus' familiarity with two lands commonly recognised by Mela, Pliny, and Solinus as the far eastern and western limits of the known world.[45] The two lands represented the last, unconquerable wilds that thwarted Roman pacification, foreshadowing Vopiscus' investigations into the far periphery that will inform the later *Vita Quadrigae*.[46]

Vopiscus' assertion that the prophesied emperor was 'destined to live for one hundred and twenty years' also evokes a popular paradoxographical *topos*. As Rohrbacher notes, debates over human life spans appear in the works of Lactantius, Arnobius, and Servius, which may explain the author's decision to wade into the debate both here and in the earlier *Vita Claudii* (2.4–5), assigned to 'Trebellius Pollio'.[47] However, human life spans were also a common

[44] On the prophecy and its political sentiments, see Syme (1971a) 237–47; den Hengst (1994).

[45] On Taprobane, see Str. 1.4.2; 2.1.14–17; 15.1.14–15; Plin. *HN* 6.81–91; 7.30; Sol. 53.1–8. On Iuverna, also called Hibernia, see Pompon. 3.53; Plin. *HN* 4.103; cf. Caes. *BGall.* 5.13; Tac. *Agr.* 24.

[46] Murphy (2004) 105–13. Intriguingly, Pliny also reports the residents of Taprobane elected kings based on their age and disposition and refused to allow sons to inherit after their fathers (*HN* 6.89), a custom which evokes both the heirless ruler of the *Historia Augusta*'s prophecy and Tacitus' and Probus' elections at the hands of the senate. I thank A. Kemezis for identifying the connection.

[47] Cf. Lact. *Div. inst.* 2.13; Arnob. *Adv. Gent.* 2.71; Serv. *Aen.* 4.653; cf. Rohrbacher (2016) 120–1 who follows Syme (1968) 25–6.

fixation among miscellanists and paradoxographers throughout the first four centuries CE.[48] Pliny devotes several digressions to long-lived individuals in the well-known Book 7, primarily confirming 120 to 140 years—the span also cited in the *Historia Augusta*—as the oldest age humans could reach (*HN* 7.27–8, 153–64). Solinus, too, turns to the subject on several occasions (11.34, 52.28), ensuring the subject's paradoxographical connotations were front and centre in readers' minds. Nor does Vopiscus' growing interest in paradoxographical minutiae come as a surprise for attentive readers.

Vopiscus' embrace of encyclopaedic and paradoxographical miscellany is telegraphed as early as the preface of the *Vita Aureliani*, which establishes 'curiosity' (*curiositas*) as a driving force for Vopiscus' varied interests. There, the biographer and a purported companion, the *praefectus urbi* Junius Tiberianus, debate the merits of biographies written by 'Trebellius Pollio', the author's previous *nom de plume*, in a transparently fake and self-referential commentary.[49] Famously, Vopiscus defends Pollio against charges of being 'too incurious, and too brief' (*multa incuriose, multa breviter*) by forcing Tiberianus to concede that famed historians had marred their eloquent histories with lies.[50] This concession leads Tiberianus to pronounce that Vopiscus may write as he wishes ('*Scribe', inquit, 'ut libet*'), a clear warning that readers should doubt Vopiscus' assertations that he has compiled 'everything worthy of remembering' (*digna memoratu*) concerning Aurelian by consulting rare, autographic sources in the *Biblioteca Ulpia* (*Aur.* 1.9, 2.2).[51]

In the life that follows, Vopiscus proves anything but 'too incurious, and too brief', filling the *Vita* with twenty-one forged documents which Vopiscus claims are the result of his tireless research.[52] In a telling acknowledgement of the farcical nature of Vopiscus' obsession with obscure archival documentation, Vopiscus repeatedly worries that readers will mistake the fruits of his labour for 'burdensome' (*odiosus*) 'frivolities' and 'trivia' (*frivola*, *perfrivola*) (3.1, 6.6, 15.3, 22.4). Yet, in what proves to be a central theme of the lives to

[48] E.g., Censorinus (*de die natal.* 17) and Phlegon of Tralles' second-century Περὶ μακροβίων. On Phlegon's corpus, see n. 138.

[49] Pausch (2010) 119–20; Kemezis (2018) 314–7; Langenfeld (2023) 185–94.

[50] The contrast between historians' mendacious eloquence and biographers' unadorned truthfulness is a running theme. See *Tyr. Trig.* 33.8; *Aur.* 2.2; *Prob.* 2.2–8; Syme (1971b) 30–3; Burian (1977) 286–90; Sogno (2012) 80–4; Rohrbacher (2016) 58–68.

[51] Assertions that biographers should record only details 'worthy of remembrance' (*digna memoratu*) first arise in *Macr.* 1.1–4 then recur frequently: *Diad.* 6.1; *Heliogab.* 18.4; *Gord.* 21.3; *Gall.* 20.5; *Tyr. Trig.* 2.4, 4.2; *Aur.* 1.9; *Tac.* 16.5; *Prob.* 24.6; *Quad. Tyr.* 13.6. On the theme's association with noble historical pursuits, see den Hengst (1981) 44–6; Sogno (2012) 75–80.

[52] Pausch (2010) 121–3, (2011) 136–9; Zinsli (2017) 143–4.

follow, Vopiscus defends his interest in 'frivolous' and 'trivial details' (*frivola, levia*) by declaring that 'curiosity stops at nothing' (*curiositas nihil recusat*) (10.1).[53]

Vopiscus' embrace of 'curiosity' culminates in an even bolder declaration at the outset of the *Vita Probi*. Again, Vopiscus flaunts his perusal of archival sources and reaffirms his intention to follow the truthful, pedestrian style of fellow biographers like Suetonius and Marius Maximus (*Prob*. 2.1–2, 2.7).[54] Here, however, Vopiscus defends his preference for the biographical mode by explicitly appealing to his curiosity. As he explains,

> sum enim unus ex curiosis, quod infitias ire non possum, incendentibus vobis, qui, cum multa sciatis, scire multo plura cupitis. (*Prob*. 2.8)
>
> I am one of those curious sorts, a fact I cannot deny, after being incited there by you, who already know much, but desire to know much more besides.

As P. Van Nuffelen and others have rightly identified, Vopiscus' self-designation as 'a curious sort' (*curiosus*) is clearly coded as negative. His chagrinned profession that he can no longer hide his affiliation indicates that most *literati* would find the designation embarrassing.[55] Yet the declaration is also a programmatic one: by asserting that his reader shares his thirst for knowledge, Vopiscus claims a sympathetic audience of fellow *curiosi* who will not mind if his account strays from the demands of eloquent 'high' history and topics 'worth remembering' (*digna memoratu*) into the more mundane interests of the 'lower' register of biography that Vopiscus has repeatedly championed.[56]

However, as the author's contemporaries would be aware, concerns about undue curiosity and appeals to 'noteworthy matters' (*digna memoratu*) no longer evoked a simple binary between 'high' history and 'low' biography at the time of the *Historia Augusta*'s composition. Promises to include only 'noteworthy matters' were also standard fare for encyclopaedic and paradoxographical authors who hoped to reassure readers about the value of the obscure trivia in which they indulged.[57] Pliny, for example, while admitting that some might find his compendium full of 'trifles' (*nugae*), insists that all 20,000 facts included

[53] *Aur.* 10.1: *frivola haec fortassis cuipiam et nimis levia esse videantur, sed curiositas nihil recusat.*

[54] On the work's Suetonian influences, see Bird (1971); Fry (2010); Rohrbacher (2016) 49–5. On its reliance on Marius Maximus, see Kulikowski (2007); Rohrbacher (2013) 153–62.

[55] Van Nuffelen (2017) 183–7; Syme (1968) 94–102; den Hengst (1981) 135–6; and Sogno (2012) 82–3.

[56] Sogno (2012) 73–82.

[57] E.g., Gel. *NA praef.* 2–3; Macr. *Sat.* 1 *praef.* 3. See Schlapbach (2014) 152–6 for discussion. On the *Historia Augusta*'s embrace of 'less elevated' topics, which it shares with paradoxographers, see also Leigh (2013) 183–4.

in the *Naturalis historia* were 'worthy of note' (*rerum dignarum cura*) (*HN praef.* 1, 17). Solinus also links his pursuit of 'noteworthy matters' (*digna memoratu*) to his curiosity in the preface to his *Polyhistor*. Solinus reassures readers that, in addition to new sections on exotic trees and the appearance of distant peoples, his revised volume would include 'numerous other noteworthy matters, which it seemed too incurious to omit' (*nonnulla etiam digna memoratu, quae praetermittere incuriosum videbatur*) (*praef.* 1.4–5).[58]

Such appeals were unsuccessful in dissuading critics.[59] As K. Schlapbach has argued, Ammianus railed not only against biographers but also natural scientists and paradoxographers for inquiring into topics 'contrary to the principles of history' (*praeceptis historiae dissonantia*) in their quest 'to investigate trivial details of obscure matters' (*humilium minutias indagare causarum*) (26.1.1).[60] Several decades later, Augustine similarly critiqued authors of Pliny and Solinus' ilk as writers of 'all too inquisitive historiography' (*velut curiosioris historiae*) and 'of curious and astonishing history' (*curiosae atquae mirabili … historiae*), lamenting their misplaced pursuit of miscellaneous trivia while at the same time synthesising their accounts of 'monstrous peoples' (*monstrosa hominum genera*) and gemstones with deft accuracy (*De civ. D.* 16.8; 21.4–5).[61] Within this contemporary discourse, the ominous implication is that Vopiscus has not merely unburdened himself of the demands of 'high' history for 'lower' biography by proudly deeming himself a 'curious sort' in the *Vita Probi*. Instead, Vopiscus had also aligned himself with a wider array of authors like Pliny and Solinus, who often confused 'noteworthy matters' with the base minutiae which captured their attention.

Indeed, readers attuned to Vopiscus' penchant for the excessively curious will find it no surprise that his quest for minute details about obscure foreign tyrants in the *Vita Quadrigae* will lead him to embrace the paradoxographical miscellany of Pliny and Solinus ever more openly.

II. The *Periplus* Begins: Firmus and the Wonders of Egypt

For knowledgeable readers, the *Vita Quadrigae* begins with a clear indication that Vopiscus' quest for details concerning the four usurpers will lead him far beyond his professed biographical mode. Much of the preface is spent defending the decision to devote an independent life to minor pretenders,

[58] Trans. and discussion in Schlapbach (2014) 142–3.

[59] Beagon (2011) 71–5.

[60] Schlapbach (2014) 151; *contra* Sogno (2012) who interprets the comments to be a narrower critique of biographical processes.

[61] Cf. *HN* 7.2.10–30; Sol. 2.38, 52.26–32; Schlapbach (2014) 144–50. On Pliny's identification as a *curiosus*, see Beagon (2011) 76–86.

which, as Vopiscus states, placed him at odds with Suetonius and Marius Maximus who were 'content with having touched on them only in passing' (*contentus eo quod eos cursim perstrinxerat*) or 'merely joining them to the lives of others' (*alienis innexuit*) (*Quad. Tyr.* 1.1–2). Suetonius' avoidance of such topics Vopiscus deems understandable as 'a noted lover of brevity' (*familiare fuit amare brevitatem*) but he expresses surprise that Maximus, who was 'extremely verbose' (*verbosissimus*) and filled his volumes with 'gratuitous rumour-mongering' and 'fictional history' (*mythistoricis se voluminibus implicavit*), did not deem such figures worthy of recognition.[62] In contrast, Vopiscus asserts that he will follow the model of 'Trebellius Pollio', who

> ea fuit diligentia, ea cura in edendis bonis malisque principibus, ut etiam triginta tyrannos uno breviter libro concluderet, qui Valeriani et Gallieni nec multo superiorum aut inferiorum principum fuere temporibus. (*Quad. Tyr.* 1.3)
>
> in writing of the emperors, both good and bad, showed such industry and care that he also included, though briefly and in a single book, the thirty pretenders of the time of Valerian and Gallienus and the emperors who lived shortly before or after them.

At first glance, much about the preface's sentiments seem to be a familiar rehashing of the author's desire to preserve the memory of minor usurpers from obscurity.[63]

More notable, however, are the criticisms of Suetonius and Marius Maximus. Just one life previously Vopiscus had praised the two as worthy models for their truthful, pedestrian style (*Prob.* 2.7) but now transfers the criticisms formerly lobbed at Pollio of being 'too brief, and too incurious' (*multa incuriose, multa breviter*) to the two biographers. Conversely, Vopiscus praises Pollio's 'diligence' and 'care' (*ea fuit diligentia, ea cura*) in compiling (highly inventive) information about thirty obscure tyrants in the preceding *Vita Triginta Tyrannorum*. These comments again reveal Vopiscus' growing preference for encyclopaedic compilation over selective biographical narration and place him ever more in the mould of encyclopaedists like Pliny, who similarly applauds the 'great diligence and long-standing care' (*tanto maiore eorum diligentia vel cura vetustiore*) of the Greek authors whom he adduces as the sources of Book 7 (*HN* 7.8).[64]

[62] For interpretation of the rare term *mythistoria*, used only here and in *Macr.* 1.1, see Poignault (2001) 264–6.

[63] E.g., *Pesc.* 1.1–2; *Macr.* 1.1–2; *Tyr. Trig.* 1.1–2.

[64] On Pliny's use of Greek sources, see Beagon (2005) 119–20.

Like Pliny, Vopiscus also flaunts his use of Greek and Egyptian sources in the *Vita*'s extended prologue, adding to the novelistic and paradoxographical tenor of the *Vita*.[65] Admitting that he had labelled Firmus a mere 'brigand' (*latrunculus*) in the *Vita Aureliani*, Vopiscus attests that newly discovered (undoubtedly false) coins and imperial edicts in 'Greek and Egyptian books' (*de Graecis autem Aegyptiisque libris*) now proved that Firmus had styled himself as an Augustus after being acclaimed in Alexandria (*Quad. Tyr.* 2.1–3, cf. *Aur.* 32.2–3).[66] In addition to justifying a more expansive treatment of the usurper, Firmus' transformation from *latrunculus* to *tyrannus* serves as the first indication that Firmus and his companions will represent the foreign dangers who stalked the distant lands at the outskirts of Rome's control. Run-ins with Egyptian bandits (*latrunculi*) and nefarious herdsmen known as *boukoloi* were a recurrent motif in novels, histories, and panegyrics of the time.[67] Thus, for attentive readers, the passage's humour derives not from the fact that Firmus was a brigand—such figures were endemic to Egypt—but instead from the assertion that Firmus merited the greater distinction of usurper.

By immediately ensconcing his readers in accounts of peculiar foreign creatures indigenous to the Egyptian periphery, the author was also adopting a long-held geographical structure, featured in both Pliny and Solinus, of treating Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia as the superlative, quintessential 'Other' against whom all other foreign peoples were compared.[68] Pliny, for example, begins his foreign *periplus* in Africa, Egypt, and Asia (Books 5–6) after leaving the more familiar geographies of Europe in Books 3–4.[69] Solinus, too, first describes the wonders of Africa, Ethiopia and Egypt (27–33), before turning to Arabia (33) and later to the far eastern reaches of India (50–2), indicating the

[65] On Vopiscus' appeal to Greek sources elsewhere, see Langenfeld (2023) 191–2.

[66] On the documents' transparently fictive nature and the passage's allusions to Aulus Gellius, see den Hengst (1981) 140–1; Paschoud (1997) 90–1; Rohrbacher (2016) 82–4.

[67] E.g., Ach. Tat. 3.9; Xen. Ephes. 3.12; Heliod. *Aeth.* 1.5.2; 2.17.4, 20.5, 24.2; 6.3.4; see Rutherford (2000) and Merrills (2017) 230 for discussion. On the author's familiarity with the ancient novel and Heliodorus' *Aethiopika*, see Syme (1968) 174; Bowersock (1994); Horsfall (2009); Pausch (2010) 124–5, 130–1; Rohrbacher (2016) 59–86; Stickler (2021) 187.

[68] On Egypt's status as the land of comparison, see Hdt. 2.35, with discussion of its adoption by later paradoxographers in Romm (1992) 55; Delattre (2014); Dueck (2016) 346–9; Garland (2016) 47; Ash (2018) 128, 140–4. On Herodotus' interest in peripheral *thaumata*, see Lightfoot (2021) 58–68.

[69] On Pliny's reliance on Mela's geographic excursuses, see Brodersen (1994) 1–2, (2015) 301–2; Desanges (2001). On Pliny's sources and methods more generally, see Beagon (2005) 30–4.

strength of the convention as a marker of paradoxographical and ethnographic analysis.[70] The author adopts this geographical schema, establishing the interplay of Egyptian and Near Eastern culture as the thematic crux of Firmus' life. The author declares that 'Firmus was a native of Seleucia' (*Firmo patria Seleucia fuit*) but insists his rebellion had been 'incited by the madness of the Egyptians' (*Quad. Tyr.* 3.1 *Alexandriam Aegyptiorum incitatus furore pervasit*).[71]

Firmus immerses himself in Egyptian *luxuria* in the life's first unequivocal allusion to Pliny's *Naturalis historia* shortly thereafter. Prior to his rebellion, the author asserts, Firmus possessed a house with 'square panes of glass set in with pitch' and 'so many books that he used often to say in public that he could feed an army on the paper and glue' (3.2).[72] In naming glass, papyrus, and glue as part of Firmus' estate, the author links Firmus with three of the most notable Egyptian exports, particularly those associated with the Alexandrian workshops from which Firmus' rebellion hailed.[73] However, as Paschoud has argued, the author's specific assertion that Firmus could 'feed' (*alere*) his troops on the products of his vast estate serves as an allusion to Book 13 of the *Naturalis historia*, where Pliny alleges that Egyptians crafted a 'chewing gum' out of papyrus, flour, and glue (13.74–83).[74] Thus, as Rohrbacher summarises, the reference serves as 'an erudite joke that only those' familiar with 'Pliny can understand'.[75]

Firmus' association with three of the most notable barbarous peoples described by Pliny is underscored in the following passage. In a sweeping claim of Firmus' geographical affinities, the author asserts that Firmus was a statesmen and trader, maintaining 'the closest relations with the Blemmyae and Saracens, and he often sent merchant-vessels to the Indians also' (*Quad. Tyr.* 3.3).[76] Immediately, the political and paradoxographical import of Firmus' foreign affiliates would have been clear to the *Historia Augusta*'s readers. Politically, the Blemmyae and Saracens represented a coalition of forces

[70] E.g., Sol. 27.5. On Solinus' modification of Mela's and Pliny's *peripli*, see Romer (2014) 76–8, 86; Brodersen (2011) 78, (2015) 305–6. Similar structures can be found in Phlegon of Tralles' *Mirabilia*; see Shannon-Henderson (2022) 55.

[71] Cf. *Tyr. Trig.* 22.1–4. Roman authors long depicted the Egyptians as mad and inflamed by furor; see Syme (1968) 25–30, 189; Schwartz (1978) 176–8; Chastagnol (1994) 1108–9; Paschoud (2002) 213; Gillett (2009) 392–6; Ash (2018) 140–4.

[72] *Quad. Tyr.* 3.2: *de huius divitiis multa dicuntur. nam et vitreis quadraturis bitumine aliisque medicamentis insertis domum instruxisse perhibetur et tantum habuisse de chartis, ut publice saepe diceret exercitum se alere posse papyro et glutine.*

[73] Versluys (2002) 239–40; Pearson (2021) 119–56, 196–200.

[74] Paschoud (2002) 214–15.

[75] Rohrbacher (2016) 35–6.

[76] *Quad. Tyr.* 3.3: *idem et cum Blemmyis societatem maximam tenuit et cum Saracenis. naves quoque ad Indos negotiatorias saepe misit.*

hostile to the Empire in the third and fourth centuries. Late ancient authors and panegyrics suggest hostilities with the Blemmyae, Saracens, and other inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula occurred under the Tetrarchs and Constantine.[77] These true events likely inform the *Historia Augusta*'s fictive claim that the peoples had aided Firmus' and Zenobia's rebellions in the preceding decades.[78] However, by naming the Blemmyae, Saracens, and Indians as Firmus' associates, 'Vopiscus' also aligns Firmus with three of the most famous and wondrous peoples to Rome's south and east.

Tales of the Blemmyae and their unusual acephalite physiognomy date as far back as Herodotus' *Histories* and feature in the writings of Pomponius Mela, Pliny, and Solinus.[79] Describing the Blemmyae as 'headless, with their mouths and eyes affixed to their chests', Pliny situated the Blemmyae among other fantastic creatures, such as the 'half-feral Goat-Pans, Gamphasantes, Satyrs, and Strapfoots', which he believed lived in the deep deserts of Ethiopia (*HN* 5.44–6).[80] Descriptions of nomadic Bedouin tribes known as *Saracenoi* or *Saraceni*, who lived to the east of Egypt, also feature in geographic and paradoxographical analyses as far back as Ptolemy's *Geographia*.[81] Of note to Pliny was their rapacious nature, which led them to rely on a mix of raiding and trade to slake their desire for riches from the Roman and Parthian empires (6.142–62), an assessment with which Solinus readily agrees (33.16). The fertility and immense size of India's fauna, including oversize dogs and trees, also fascinated Pliny, Solinus, and other authors (*HN* 7.21–2, 35; Sol. 52.34–50).[82]

Readers familiar with Pliny's and Solinus' descriptions of India can detect further allusions in the rare *luxuria* associated with Firmus. Readers are told that Firmus 'owned two elephant tusks, ten feet in length' (*duos dentes elephanti*

[77] On the Blemmyae, see Stickler (2021), esp. 178–80. On their conflicts under the Tetrarchs, see *Pan. Lat.* 11.17.4 with discussion in Nixon and Rodgers (1994) 173–4 n. 82. For conflicts against the Saracens and other Arabian peoples, see *Pan. Lat.* 3.5.4, 3.7.1, 5.5; Eus. *Vit. Const.* 4.7.1; and Ruf. *Hist. eccl.* 1.9–10, with discussion in Millar (1993) 177, 399; Schott (2013) 181; Schneider (2015) 186.

[78] *Tyr. Trig.* 30.7; *Aur.* 27.4, 28.2–4, 33.4, 41.10; *Prob.* 4.1, 17.2–6, 19.2, 19.8; cf. Zos. 1.71.1. On the passage's historicity, see Stickler (2021) 181–8.

[79] Hdt. 4.191; Pompon. 1.23, 1.47–8; Sol. 31.5–6; cf. Stickler (2021) 177, 188–91.

[80] *HN* 5.44–6: *quidam solitudinibus interposuerunt Atlantas eosque iuxta Aegipanas semiferos et Blemmyas et Gamphasantas et Satyros et Himantopodas. … Blemmyis traduntur capita abesse ore et oculis pectori adfixis.* See Garland (2016) 47 for discussion.

[81] Ptol. *Geog.* 5.17.3; 6.7.21. On the term *Saraceni* and its usage in the *Historia Augusta*, see Bowersock (1987) 71–5 and Rohrbacher (2018) 56–8. However, use of the term by Eusebius (*Onom.* 650, 914) and in *Pan. Lat.* 3.5.4, 3.7.1 (see Schott (2013) 181; Millar (1993) 177, 399), undercuts Rohrbacher's assertion that the *Historia Augusta*'s use of the term was a rare and unique borrowing from Ammianus.

[82] E.g., Hom. *Od.* 1.23–4; Hdt. 7.70; Heliod. *Aeth.* 9.6.2; Philostr. *VA* 3.20.1–2.

pedum denum) gifted to him by the Indians (*Quad. Tyr.* 3.4–5).[83] As Gilliam has noted, elephants were known to Roman readers from their appearance in warfare, imperial regalia, and gladiatorial spectacles.[84] However, differences in size and strength between species native to India and Africa were points of contention.[85] Pliny and Solinus leave no doubt about which species were the most immense, commenting on the Indian species' massive frame as proof that India was the home of the world's largest species of animals on several occasions (*HN* 6.21–3; 7.21–2; 8.32; Sol. 25.8).[86]

Vopiscus slyly engages with this paradoxographical debate. By reporting on the size of the tusks gifted to Firmus—a stunning 'ten feet in length'—the author confirms for attentive readers that Firmus' tusks were, indeed, derived from the massive Indian beasts rather than their demurer African counterparts. Readers of Pliny also recognise the symbolism of the Indians' gift. According to Pliny, within India, the Andarian peoples were said to furnish their king with the large quadrupeds, and the Kings of the Megallians and Asmagians were said to possess no less than 500 and 300 of the animals, respectively (6.22–3). Thus, for readers aware of Pliny's assessments, the Indians' gift of elephantine ivory also thematically signals their recognition of Firmus' regal demeanor, a worrying indication of the usurper's budding sedition.

Further evidence that Firmus is a character ripped from the pages of Pliny's and Solinus' accounts is clear from the subsequent description of Firmus' physiognomy. The author inventively reports that

> fuit tamen Firmus statura ingenti, oculis foris eminentibus, capillo crispo, fronte vulnerata, vultu nigriore, reliqua parte corporis candidus sed pilosus atque hispidus, ita ut eum plerique Cyclopem vocarent. (*Quad. Tyr.* 4.1)
>
> Firmus was of huge size, his eyes very prominent, his hair curly, his brow scarred, his face rather black, while the rest of his body was white, though rough and hairy, so that many called him a Cyclops.

[83] A digression concerning these tusks reinforces the corrupting power of eastern luxury items; see Poignault (2001) 254 n. 17; Paschoud (2002) 216–21; cf. Cic. *Ver.* 2.4.103–4 and Schol. Juv. 9.122–7. On Egyptian and eastern goods' association with moralising excess, see Murphy (2004) 95–105; Sanchez Hernandez (2018), esp. 144.

[84] Gilliam (1980) 97–8, 100.

[85] Cf. Hdt. 3.114; Diod. Sic. 2.16.2–4; Pol. 5.84; and Schneider (2015) 191.

[86] Pliny claims the only elephants to surpass Indian elephants were those from Taprobane (*HN* 6.81).

Prior studies have interpreted Firmus' visage using the physiognomic tradition, which had long been embedded within the biographical genre and which equated physical features with moralising character traits.[87] In this tradition, dark complexions and shrewd eyes were signs of cowardice and suspicion, while Cyclopean size and a hairy appearance indicated incivility and readiness for battle.[88] Such qualities are not out of place for a foreign *tyrannus* and facilitate comparisons between Firmus and other *tyranni* in the collection, as Paschoud and Chastagnol have argued.[89]

Nevertheless, evidence that readers should look beyond physiognomic explanations for Firmus' physique comes from within the *Vita Quadrigae*. The author later refuses to discuss Saturninus' 'stature, person, and comeliness', asserting that it would be 'tiresome' (*odiosum*) to include such 'trivial' (*frivola*) details, 'which have almost no value as an example' (11.4).[90] Admittedly, such statements often signal the author's desire to thwart reader expectations by transgressing traditional biographical tenets. However, the mere presence of Firmus' physiognomic digression signals a notable departure from the author's *modus operandi*. Though physiognomic descriptions are common in the collection's earlier lives, such descriptions are extremely rare in later portions of the *HA*.[91] Of the forty-seven figures discussed by 'Pollio' and 'Vopiscus', only two other figures—Zenobia and Claudius Gothicus (*Tyr. Trig.* 30.13–16; *Claud.* 13.5)—receive physical descriptions, illustrating the exceptional nature of Firmus' description here. This irregularity, combined with the disavowal of physiognomic evaluation and biographical tenets elsewhere in the life, signals readers should again consider the idiosyncrasies of foreign ethnography—the *Vita*'s other discernable model—as the impetus for Firmus' unusual visage.

For students of the genre, Firmus' inhuman size, dark complexion, and coarse hair covering his body are immediately recognisable as characteristics associated with the populations of Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Near East. Pliny and Solinus report that inhabitants of Africa, Arabia, and India were not

[87] Sabbah (1978) 425–33; Passarella (2015). On physiognomic characterisations in the *Historia Augusta*, see Neri (1998); Rohrbacher (2010), (2016) 53–4, 58.

[88] Sabbah (1978) 425–7; Passarella (2015) 235.

[89] Gilliam (1980) 102 and Paschoud (1997) 88–9, (2002) 222–4 discern comparisons between Firmus' appearance and that of Maximinus Thrax (*Max.* 6.8, 28.8). On Maximinus' designation as a *semibarbarus* and a Cyclops (*Max.* 8.5; *Max. et Balb.* 11.1), see Moralee (2008), esp. 60–2, 79–82. Chastagnol (1970) 81 proposes a connection between Ammianus' description of the Gauls (15.12.1) and Firmus' looks, though the minor commonalities suggest the authors' independent reliance on similar tropes; cf. Passarella (2015) 239–41.

[90] *Quad. Tyr.* 11.4: *longum est frivola quaeque conectere, odiosum dicere, quali statura fuerit, quo corpore, quo decore, quid biberit, quid comederit, ab aliis ista dicantur, quae prope ad exemplum nihil prosunt. nos ad ea, quae sunt dicenda, redeamus.*

[91] Bird (1971) 131; Paschoud (2002) 222–3; Rohrbacher (2016) 53–4, 58.

merely tall but intimidatingly gigantic, ranging from nine and a half to twelve feet tall.[92] Inhabitants of Arabia and India were also deemed nearly bestial in their amount of body hair. Some even abstained from clothing due to their hairy pelts, evoking the shaggy hair cloaking Firmus' body.[93] Compared to Greeks, Romans, and Near Easterners, inhabitants of Ethiopia, Egypt, and India were also associated with darker skin tones by Pliny and other ancient authors.[94] Like other *mirabilia* on the edges of the known world, Pliny and other ethnographers attributed physiognomic difference to the climatic variations to which foreign peoples were exposed.[95] Like his predecessors, Pliny attributed Ethiopians' 'scorched appearance' and 'curly beards and hair' to their proximity to the sun, an explanation which gave rise to their identification as Ethiopians—Αἰθιοπῆες quite literally meaning 'burnt-faces' (*HN* 2.189–90; 7.6; cf. Sol. 52.14).[96]

Evidence that the author deliberately curated Firmus' physique as an amalgam of Ethiopian, Egyptian, and Near Eastern traits is clear from Firmus' two-toned, racial complexion.[97] Translators have often softened the competing descriptors of Firmus' complexion, but, as Paschoud correctly notes, a literal translation conjures a starker image: Firmus possesses a black African head on a lighter-skinned Near Eastern body.[98] For Paschoud, the image evokes two usurpers with African connections: Pescennius Niger, whose complexion was said to be black, and Clodius Albinus, whose complexion was white, as their names suggest.[99] Yet for those attuned to the *Vita*'s paradoxographical framing, Firmus' blended ethnicities are another indication of Firmus' conflation with the monstrous 'prodigies' native to Egypt. For ancient paradoxographers, the hot climates of Asia and Africa predisposed their inhabitants to exactly this form of racial mixing.[100] As Garland has noted, in Pliny, 'composite beings' such as Firmus were seen as 'jests of nature, *ludibria naturae*, or as nature's mistakes' (*HN* 7.32), signalling the derogatory and

[92] Plin. *HN* 6.54; 7.21–2, 28, 31, 74; Sol. 30.4, 52.20, 53.4, 53.11.

[93] E.g., Plin. *HN* 6.109, 162; Sol. 33.16, 52.18, 54.11.

[94] E.g., Hom. *Od.* 1.23–4; Hdt. 3.101; Str. 1.2.35; 7.3.7; 15.1.13; Arr. *Anab.* 5.4.4; Pompon. 3.67. See Schneider (2015) 185–6, 198–9; Dueck (2016) 346–9; and Garland (2016) 50.

[95] Merrills (2004) 223–5; Murphy (2004) 42–4; Garland (2016) 51–2; Dueck (2016) 346–9; Kennedy (2016) 15; and Kominko (2016) 374, 380 n. 20.

[96] Cf. Arr. *Ind.* 6.9 and Str. 2.2.3; 15.1.24; Schneider (2015) 186–7 and Garland (2016) 47.

[97] Chastagnol (1970) 89 and Paschoud (2002) 222–3 identify Firmus' looks as a pastiche of 'African' features, though do not engage with the paradoxographical implications.

[98] Paschoud (1997) 87–9.

[99] Paschoud (2002) 223.

[100] Cf. Arist. *Gen. an.* 746a29.

satirical intent of Firmus' description.[101] Here, Firmus' blended ethnicities also thematically warn of Firmus' assimilation into his Egyptian environment: the dark head transposed onto Firmus' Syrian body is a physical manifestation of the seditious Egyptian mindset increasingly guiding Firmus' rebellion.

Similar *topoi* inspire Firmus' diet. To fuel his Cyclopean form, Firmus reportedly consumed vast quantities of meat and was even known to 'consume an entire ostrich in a single day' (*Quad. Tyr.* 4.2).[102] Likewise, despite his inclination to drink 'little wine but much water', Firmus was able to drain 'two buckets full of wine while remaining sober' when challenged to a drinking competition by Burburus, a member of Aurelian's *vexillatio* (4.3–4). Intemperance and excessive consumption of luxury foodstuffs are leitmotifs associated with other usurpers and *mali principes* ('bad emperors') elsewhere in the *Historia Augusta*, so their presence is not entirely unexpected here.[103] However, unusual diets, particularly those featuring exotic meats, were also a common ethnographic and paradoxographical trope found in the writings of Pliny and Solinus.[104] Reliance on native foodstuffs—such as Firmus' consumption of African ostriches—identified remote peoples as less civilised and more bestial than their Greek and Roman counterparts but also more attuned to the mystical properties of resources sourced from their far-flung lands.[105]

Barbarous peoples' relationship with alcohol was also a common topic in ethnographic and paradoxographical accounts. Authors as far back as Herodotus contradictorily attested that Ethiopians and other peripheral peoples preferred water over wine but were inherently drawn to wine and other alcoholic beverages, while being immune to the drinks' inebriating effects.[106] Ironically, this habit was assumed to reflect the Ethiopians' simplistic naivete and their separation from the more 'civilised' cultures of Greece, Persia, and Rome for whom the intoxication of wine proved more irresistible.[107] Other peripheral peoples, like Gauls and Parthians, were

[101] Garland (2010) 34–50. On late antique anxieties concerning racial purity, see Sivan (1996); Chauvot (1998).

[102] *Quad. Tyr.* 4.2–4: *carne multa vescebatur, struthionem ad diem comedisse fertur. vini non multum bibit, aquae plurimum. … fuit tamen ei contentio cum Aureliani ducibus ad bibendum, si quando eum temptare voluissent. nam quidam Burburus nomine de numero vexillariorum, notissimus potator, cum ad bibendum eundem provocasset, situlas duas plenas mero duxit et toto postea convivio sobrius fuit; et cum ei Burburus diceret, 'quare non faeces bibisti?' respondit ille: 'stulte, terra non bibitur'.*

[103] Elagabalus is also linked with the consumption of ostriches (*Heliogab.* 22.1, 28.4, 30.2, 32.4); cf. Syme (1968) 113; Paschoud (2002) 222–4.

[104] E.g., Plin. *HN* 6.109; 7.27, 31; Sol. 33.17, 54.9; cf. Diod. Sic. 3.21.1; Str. 16.4.14; and Pompon. 3.75.

[105] Kominko (2016) 374.

[106] E.g., Hdt. 3.22–3.

[107] Romm (1992) 54–8.

believed to be attracted to alcoholic beverages but without the same inborn ability to withstand intoxication, as Pliny recollects (*HN* 14.49, 148). Earlier passages in the *Vita Pescennii* and *Vita Triginta Tyrannorum* indicate the author was aware of these traditions and was using the *Vita Quadrigae* to elaborate on familiar tropes.[108] Indeed, Vopiscus' allegations that the Roman Burburus was left askance after witnessing Firmus' consumption evokes the notion of a central, civilised individual agog at the wondrous abilities of his peripheral counterpart (*Quad. Tyr.* 4.4). Reportedly, Firmus' consumption was so immense that Burburus was compelled to ask why Firmus then refused to drink the 'dregs' (*faeces*) of his wine. Firmus' response that drinking the dregs would be akin to drinking 'earth' (*terra*) imparts to Firmus the same naivety espoused by foreign drinkers like Ammianus' Gauls whose 'backward' ideas shaped their attitudes to alcohol (15.12.4).[109]

If readers had yet to catch on to the *Vita*'s paradoxographical tenor, further confirmation that the author was a careful student of Pliny's *Naturalis historia* arises a moment later. According to Vopiscus, Firmus was

> nervis robustissimus, ita ut Tritanum vinceret, cuius Varro meminit. nam et incudem superpositam pectori constanter aliis tundentibus pertulit, cum ipse reclinis ac resupinus et curvatus in manus penderet potius quam iaceret. (*Quad. Tyr.* 4.2–3)
>
> most resolute in spirit, and in sinews most strong, so that he surpassed even Tritannus, of whom Varro makes mention. For he would hold out resolutely when an anvil was placed on his chest and men struck it, while he, leaning backward face up, supporting his weight on his hands, seemed to be suspended rather than to be lying down.

Clearly, Firmus' strength serves as one of the author's onomastic puns; it comes as no surprise that Firmus is *firmissimus*, 'the firmest'.[110] Yet, as Magie and Paschoud have noted, the reference to Varro's description of Tritannus, the famed gladiator of yore, serves as another direct allusion to Book 7 of the

[108] *Pesc. Nig.* 7.7–8, 10.3; *Tyr. Trig.* 30.18; cf. Chastagnol (1970) 81–2 who prefers a Christian explanation for Firmus' and Bonosus' immunity to alcohol, see discussion below section III.

[109] Chastagnol (1970) 77–80 identifies Ammianus' comments as the inspiration for Firmus' propensity for alcohol, but the theme's ubiquity suggests the two authors were independently reiterating paradoxographical *topoi*. Chastagnol (1976) 108, (1994) 1118 n. 4, alternatively posits a connection between Firmus' comments and biblical exegesis on Isaiah 51.7, Ezek. 23.34, and Psalm 74.9, though as Paschoud (2002) 226 notes the proposed passages concerning cups and drinking seem too generic to be compelling.

[110] Cf. Magie (1921–32) III.392; Paschoud (2002) 224–5.

Naturalis historia. There, Pliny summarises Varro's description of Tritanus' strength and that of his son, who supposedly defeated an enemy with his bare hands and carried the man off to camp with a single finger (*HN* 7.81).

What Paschoud and others have missed is that Firmus' unusual feats with the anvil are also inspired by Pliny's subsequent catalogue of strong men lauded by Varro. These figures include an Augustan-era centurion, Vinnius Valens, who was reportedly able to 'grasp hold of wagons with a single hand and immobilise them' despite the efforts of 'draught animals trying to pull them' (7.82).[111] Others include Fufius Salvius, who could climb stairs with eight hundred pounds (~262 kg) suspended on his limbs, and Athanatus who could 'walk across a stage wearing a five-hundred-pound (~164 kg) leaden breast-plate with boots on his feet of the same weight'. Pliny concludes with the anecdote that, 'When the athlete Milo of Croton stood firm, no one could dislodge him and when he held an apple no one could force him to straighten out a single one of his fingers' (7.83). Pliny's catalogue was clearly a notable passage. Solinus also presents a summary, though he includes only the feats of Tritannus and Milo of Croton (1.75–6), making Pliny's longer catalogue the more likely intended intertext.[112]

Indeed, with Pliny's longer catalogue in mind, the origins of Firmus' skills with the anvil become clear. In place of the weights suspended on Salvius' and Athanatus' bodies, Firmus supports an anvil suspended on his stomach. In place of Milo's unassailable grasp on the apple or Valens' unbreakable hold on the wagons, Firmus proves able to hold his position despite bystanders forcefully drumming upon the anvil.[113] Yet even here, the author adapts the allusion to denote Firmus' strength as another wonder of the eastern periphery. The unusually 'yogic' nature of Firmus' chosen pose—bent backward, supporting himself on his hands, a position gymnasts recognise as an arched back-bend—conjures comparisons to Pliny's descriptions of the Indian Gymnosophists, who stood all day on one foot in the scorching sand, and the Ethiopian Sciapodes or 'Shadow-Footed Men' who sheltered from the sun by lying with their single large foot suspended above them (*HN* 7.22–3; cf. Sol. 52.25).[114] Both peoples have been identified as misinformed references to early practitioners of yoga.[115] Descriptions of the two peoples arise shortly before Pliny's catalogue of strong men in Book 7, suggesting the author was again

[111] For Latin text and translation, see Beagon (2005) 76–7.

[112] For a comparison of the two passages, see Hillard (2014) 62–4.

[113] Feats accomplished by Maximinus Thrax also inspire comparison to Milo and Valens (*Max.* 6.9), again signalling the similarities between the two foreign-born figures and the author's familiarity with these marvels; see n. 89.

[114] Murphy (2004) 87–95.

[115] Friedman (2000) 25; Murphy (2004) 91. Physical strength was also associated with 'moral and intellectual weakness'; Kominko (2016) 374.

inspired by Pliny's accounts of African and Indian wonders when devising Firmus' biography.

These increasingly elaborate Plinian and paradoxographical intertexts make it unsurprising that Firmus' miraculous ability to swim among crocodiles—translated at the outset of our study—was also informed by ethnographic and paradoxographical traditions. By ascribing to Firmus the ability to swim among and ride the great beasts of Egypt, 'Vopiscus' was evoking one of the most famous *topoi* concerning Egypt and other foreign locales. Authors from Homer and Herodotus onward describe wondrous pygmy (*pygmaei*) races who were locked in ancestral battles with the rare fauna of their lands.[116] Pliny and Solinus dutifully record the many short-statured pygmy races thought to reside in the far reaches of Scythia, the Prasian mountains, and territories near the Ganges.[117] Arguably, however, the most famous of these pygmy races were the Egyptian-dwelling Tentyritae and the Nilotic 'pygmies' with which they were often conflated.[118]

According to tradition, the Tentyritae were a race of short-statured men, who lived along the Nile on the island of Tentyrus (modern-day Denderah) in Middle Egypt. Among their marvellous traits, the Tentyritae were believed to possess a supernatural ability to ride, hunt, and swim among crocodiles unscathed. Pliny, for example, applauds the Tentyritae's bravery, reporting that they alone of all men were willing to 'dive into the river and mount upon crocodiles' backs as if riding a horse' (*HN* 8.92–3).[119] Similar accounts of the Tentyritae's feats are found in Seneca, Aulus Gellius, and Solinus, among others, ensuring that the *Historia Augusta*'s readers had many textual referents for the Tentyritae and Firmus' Nilotic escapades.[120] Legends of the Egyptian Tentyritae had also spawned a parallel artistic tradition, which featured pygmy-like figures riding, hunting, or copulating with crocodiles, hippopotami, and cranes in Nilescapes across the Mediterranean.[121] Scantily clad with exaggerated features, these caricatured figures are recognisable in Nilotic

[116] Cf. Hom. *Il.* 3.4–6; Hdt. 2.32; cf. Schneider (2015) 188.

[117] *HN* 4.44; 6.70; 7.26; cf. Sol. 10.11–12, 52.15, 10.58. On Solinus' borrowing, see Brodersen (2011) 81–2.

[118] Pliny reports on a second 'nation of Pygmies', who dwelled 'among the marshes in which the Nile rises' (*HN* 6.188). This placement suggests this race was distinct from the Tentyritae, who lived in Middle Egypt, though he fails to clarify; see Merrills (2017) 144–5, 286.

[119] *HN* 8.93*: sed adversum ire soli hi audent, quin et flumini innatant dorsoque equitantium modo inpositi hiantibus resupino capite ad morsum addita in os clava,* … Cf. *HN* 5.109; Str. 17.1.44.

[120] E.g., Sen. *QNat* 4a.2.15; Gell. *NA* 10.21; Lucian *Philops.* 34; Sol. 32.27.

[121] For a description of these figures and their prevalence in art, particularly during and after the first century CE, see Versluys (2002) 275–88; Merrils (2017) 117; Barrett (2019) 51–3, 132–5, 336.

frescoes, mosaics, and other *Aegyptiaca* throughout the first through seventh centuries CE.

Though hugely popular at locations like Pompeii, images and objects featuring Nilotic pygmy are widely attested throughout the third and fourth centuries CE with numerous examples found in the environs of the city of Rome itself.[122] The ubiquity and longevity of these motifs ensured images of frolicking Nilotic *pygmaei* remained potent referents for Egypt at the time of the *Historia Augusta*'s composition. Much about Firmus' Nilotic escapades evokes these textual and artistic referents.[123] In addition to his aquatic and avian steeds, which E. Alföldi-Rosenbaum first noted nearly a half-century ago,[124] Firmus' two-tone complexion—half-white, half-black—also mirrors the varied ethnic markers of pygmies in Roman Nilescapes. Often, *pygmaei* are depicted with darker skin tones, though some Nilescapes include pygmy-like figures with both dark and light complexions mimicking the confusion in classical texts.[125]

As is typical however, the author once again places a Plinian spin on the tradition. Rather than battling the crocodiles and hippopotami for dominance through brute strength alone, Firmus ensures his peaceful coexistence with the Nilotic fauna by rubbing himself in crocodile fat (*Quad. Tyr.* 6.2).[126] As Gilliam has noted, this act again reveals Firmus to be a practitioner of specific forms of sympathetic magic associated with foreign peoples throughout the *Naturalis historia*.[127] Set against the caricatured images of the Tentyritae and their pygmy counterparts in art and literature, however, the intended satire is clear. Like the *pygmaei*, Firmus is offered up to the *Historia Augusta*'s readers as a wondrous creature of the Nile, a risible Egyptian *mirabilis* come to life—a half-Syrian, half-Egyptian hybrid, a pygmy-dwarf of inhuman size and strength, who mistakenly set his sights on controlling the Empire, though his skills were better suited to a low-class animal tamer.

[122] On their dating and distribution in Pompeii and elsewhere, see Versluys (2002) 76–81, 200–4, 232, 285–95; Merrills (2017) 106–49; Barrett (2019) 182–225.

[123] Egyptianising motifs in Seneca, Pliny, and Juvenal are also informed by Nilotic art; see Merrills (2017) 144–7. On paradoxography's use of visual imagery to evoke readers' 'wonder', see Ash (2018) 126–7.

[124] Alföldi-Rosenbaum (1972) 12–13; Gilliam (1980) 98; and Poignault (2001) 256–8. On the typical fauna featured in Roman Nilescapes, see Versluys (2002) 265–9.

[125] On the demarcation among pygmies, dwarves, and other individuals in Nilotic artwork, see Versluys (2002) 84–5, 275–7, 282–4; Merrills (2017) 119–23; and Barrett (2019) 53–8.

[126] Utopian images are common in Nilotic imagery and signal the lost rapport between man and beast in civilised areas of the world; see Fragaki (2008).

[127] E.g., *HN* 26.51; 28.108; 30.22; Gilliam (1980) 100–1.

Despite being framed as the triumphant culmination of Vopiscus' immersion in Plinian and paradoxographical minutiae, the author (in the guise of Vopiscus) is at great pains to distance himself from the farcical image. Prior to describing Firmus' Nilotic escapades, 'Vopiscus' feigns reluctance to report on the fantastical parts of Firmus' legacy, asserting that the preceding material was all that he had discovered concerning Firmus that was 'worthy of mention' (6.1 *haec nos de Firmo cognovisse scire debuisti, sed digna memoratu*). Vopiscus insists that readers who wish to learn more should instead consult the writings of a likely apocryphal Aurelius Festivus, Aurelian's freedman, whom Vopiscus identifies as the source of the fantastical tale (6.2). However, for readers aware that the true author of Firmus' farcical escapades was not the spurious Aurelius Festivus nor even 'Vopiscus' but, in fact, the author himself, the biographer's attempt to deflect responsibility for the farcically obvious paradoxographical image rings hollow.[128]

Attentive readers can even detect humorous echoes of Pliny's *habitus* in Vopiscus' attempts to abnegate responsibility for the marvellous tale. Pliny similarly eschews responsibility for the 'incredible marvels' (*incredibilia*) that he describes at the outset of the now oft-cited paradoxographical Book 7 (*HN* 7.6–8).[129] Such abnegations were a quintessential tool for paradoxographers, who hoped to prioritise readers' astonishment by deferring questions concerning the authenticity of reported *paradoxa* to the sources from which their marvels derived.[130] Nor are Vopiscus' familiar reassurances that Firmus' biography is full of 'notable facts' (*digna memoratu*) able to persuade readers that Vopiscus had limited himself to worthy insights into Firmus' character. Only paragraphs before, Vopiscus had chastised himself for indulging in undignified trivia (*levia*) after describing Firmus' drinking and inhuman strength. He admonishes himself, 'But we are narrating mere trifles when we should be telling what is of greater importance' (*Quad. Tyr.* 4.3–4 *levia persequimur, cum maiora dicenda sint*). The admission, coming on the heels of two characteristically ethnographic and paradoxographical tropes, makes it unsurprising that 'Vopiscus' would again feel compelled to reassert his biographical *habitus* at the very moment his interest in paradoxographical *levia* had become the most blatant.

Similarly futile attempts to distance himself from Plinian miscellany immediately follow the description of Firmus' Nilotic escapades. After reporting on Firmus' aquatic feats, Vopiscus decries the tale's trivial value, saying

[128] For possible origins of Festivus' name, see Bird (1971) 131 n. 1; Paschoud (2002) 229.

[129] *HN* 7.8: *nec tamen ego in plerisque eorum obstringam fidem meam potiusque ad auctores relegabo, qui dubiis reddentur omnibus, modo ne sit fastidio Graecos sequi, tanto maiore eorum diligentia vel cura vetustiore.*

[130] Naas (2011) 66–7; Shannon-Henderson (2019) 156–9.

> sed haec scire quid prodest? cum et Livius et Sallustius taceant res leves de his, quorum vitas arripuerunt. non enim scimus, quales mulos Clodius habuerit aut mulas Titus Annius Milo, aut utrum Tusco equo sederit Catilina an Sardo, vel quali in clamide Pompeius usus fuerit purpura. (*Quad. Tyr.* 6.3–4)
>
> But what avails it to know all this, especially as both Livy and Sallust are silent in regard to trivial matters concerning those men on whose biographies they have laid hold? For instance, we do not know of what breed were the mules of Clodius or the she-mules of Titus Annius Milo, or whether the horse that Catiline rode was a Tuscan or a Sardinian, or what kind of purple Pompey used for his cloak.

Initially, Vopiscus' contrast between his preceding biography as topics 'worthy of remembrance' (*digna memoratu*) and Festivus' account as mere trivia (*res leves*) seems to be another variation on the divide between the rigorous content worthy of 'high' history and the pedestrian, 'lower' register of biography. Comments distinguishing historians' eloquence from biographers' pedestrian but truthful style in the aforementioned *Vita Aureliani* and *Vita Probi*, as well at the conclusion of the *Vita Quadrigae* and in the subsequent *Vita Cari*, signal these comparisons were not far from the author's mind.[131]

Yet for readers immersed in the *Vita*'s Plinian and paradoxographical intertexts, confirmation that the passage is more directly intended as a self-reflexive critique at the Plinian tenor of the *Vita* can be found in the specific details deemed unsuitable for biography—namely, Clodius', Milo's, and Catiline's preferred breeds of horses and mules and Pompey's favourite purple dye. Pliny devotes extensive treatments to nearly these exact topics in the *Naturalis historia*. In Book 8, Pliny conducts an exhaustive analysis of the mule and horse breeds favoured by Romans, Scythians, Spaniards, and Asturians. He surveys the qualities of Greek Arcadian, Italian Iteatine, Celtiberian, Cappadocian, and Galatian breeds (*HN* 8.154–74) and even notes that the most valuable mule ever purchased (at 400,000 sesterces) was owned by the Republican senator Quintus Axius, a contemporary of Clodius, Milo, and Catiline mentioned in the *Four Tyrants* (8.167).[132]

Pliny's interest in equine matters is followed in Book 9 by a lengthy discussion of the origins, costs, and appearance of various purple dyes favoured in different regions of the world (9.124–64). Again, the dyes preferred by notable personages of Rome's Republican past pique Pliny's interest (9.136). Remarking on the popularity of 'double-dyed Tyrian purple' (*dibapha Tyria*),

[131] *Aur.* 1.1, 10.1; *Prob.* 2.7–8; *Quad Tyr.* 15.9; *Car.* 21.2–3; cf. *Tyr. Trig.* 1.1.

[132] Varro, *Rust.* 3.2.1–7; Cic. *Ep. ad Att.* 4.15.

Pliny reports that the first to wear this shade had been the Republican general and consul P. Cornelius Lentulus Spinther, who had aided Cicero in exposing Catiline's conspiracy and fought alongside Pompey in his war against Caesar (9.137). Pliny thus once again describes the sartorial preferences of contemporaries of the Republican dissidents named in the *Historia Augusta*.[133] This concatenation of topics clearly indicates that the author's attack on the limited value of knowing the equine and sartorial preferences of Republican-era dissidents targeted the specific types of *trivia* championed by Pliny the Elder rather than generic *levia* rejected by writers of history.

Much like his efforts to distance himself from the spurious 'Festivus', Vopiscus' attempts to eschew the minutiae of Pliny's *Naturalis historia* prove ineffective. Although Vopiscus derides such topics as unworthy of inclusion in biography, his ability to reference obtuse passages from Pliny's treatise undermines his detachment from the material. Conversely, Vopiscus' repeated facetious denials are a humorous indication that Vopiscus (and thus the author) is all too aware that he has not merely fallen from the demands of 'high' history into the scurrilous interests of 'low' biographers but that he had instead adopted a third, even less discerning mode associated with encyclopaedists and paradoxographers like Pliny and Solinus. Of course, for readers to discern the full humour of Vopiscus' transformation from diligent biographer into encyclopaedic paradoxographer, they too would have to reveal themselves to be the kindred *curiosi* that Vopiscus had claimed as his intended audience in the *Vita Probi*, underscoring the author's metatextual games for erudite readers.

III. Completing the *Periplus*: The Lives of Saturninus, Proculus and Bonosus

Nor, despite Vopiscus' protestations, does the paradoxographical and Plinian nature of the *Vita* cease with Firmus. Continuing his *periplus*, the author shifts his attention slightly to the east to discuss the rebellion of Saturninus, who supposedly 'seized the imperial power in the regions of the East in opposition to Probus' (*Quad. Tyr.* 6.5 *qui contra Probum imperium sibimet in orientis partibus vindicavit*). Like Firmus, the author depicts the Gallic Saturninus as another *exemplum* of peripheral peoples' seditious nature, particularly when exposed to the Egyptian fervour for rebellion, yet the two central conceits of the life—Saturninus' Gallic ancestry and the Egyptians' role in spurring his usurpation

[133] On Spinther's career, see Badian (2012).

(7.1–6)—are again figments of the author's imagination.[134] The life's paradoxographical intertexts coalesce in a lengthy, false imperial letter. As proof of his assessment that all Egyptians were 'puffed up, madmen' (*viri ventosi, furibundi*), the author proffers 'one of Hadrian's letters, taken from the works of his freedman, which fully reveals the character of the Egyptians' (7.4–8.10).[135] Initially, readers have reason to hope that this letter may be authentic. The ostensible source of the letter, Phlegon of Tralles, was a real second-century author whom the *Vita Hadriani* (16.1) identifies as the writer of a biographical account of Hadrian.[136] However, anachronisms indicate that this letter is another of the author's false inventions designed to expound upon the Plinian intertexts now permeating the *Vita*.[137]

The first hint that the author was once again flirting with the boundaries of biographical analysis and paradoxographical miscellany relates to its reputed source: Phlegon of Tralles. In addition to his supposed biographical treatment of Hadrian, Phlegon was also associated with numerous miscellaneous works, including one on the Olympic Games, a treatise on long-lived individuals in Rome, and—importantly—a paradoxographical work, Περὶ θαυμασίων (*On Marvels*).[138] Vopiscus' overt citation of another author who conflated and transgressed the boundaries between biography, miscellany, and paradoxography is too incisive to be coincidence. The letter's ethnographic tenor is also apparent from its focus on Egyptians' religious and economic practices and its rehashing of the province's major exports including glass, paper, linen—all products readily familiar from Firmus' biography (8.2–7).[139]

Two further Plinian allusions arise at the letter's conclusion. After complaining about the Egyptians' treatment of Aelius and Antinous, Hadrian expresses his wish that the Egyptians would be forced to survive upon their own chickens, which, he says, 'they breed in a fashion I am ashamed to

[134] Coins and fourth-century histories suggest Saturninus was not a Gaul but a North African Moor and that his rebellion was also confined to Syria and Antioch rather than Egypt, as the *Historia Augusta* briefly admits (*Prob.* 18.4). On this and the life's other anachronisms, see *Quad. Tyr.* 9.2–3; Zos. 1.66.1; Syme (1971a) 18; Chastagnol (1994) 1108–9; Paschoud (1997) 92–4, (2002) 259–61; Estiot (2002) 240–1.

[135] *Quad. Tyr.* 7.6: … *Hadriani epistulam ponam ex libris Flegontis liberti eius proditam, ex qua penitus Aegyptiorum vita detegitur.*

[136] Cf. *Sev.* 20.1. On Phlegon as the purported source of the letter, see Fündling (2006) 773–4; Galimberti (2010); Shannon-Henderson (2022) 51–2.

[137] Syme (1971a) 17–29; Paschoud (2002) 242–5. Galimberti (2010) alternatively argues the letter's falsehoods were introduced by Phlegon, but anachronisms concerning events of the 130s and allusions to fourth-century events (see Schwartz (1996) 461 and Paschoud (2002) 248–56) clearly indicate that the letter's fictive content was the work of the *HA* author.

[138] Shannon-Henderson (2019) 42–61.

[139] On the letter's religious sentiments, see *Quad. Tyr.* 8.2–4, 8.7–9; Schmid (1966); Syme (1971a) 19–29; Schwartz (1996) 461; Paschoud (2002) 246–56; Galimberti (2010).

describe' (8.8–9 *quos quem ad modum fecundant, pudet dicere*).[140] As Paschoud noted, the inspiration for Hadrian's insult is found in Pliny's examination of the mating and laying patterns of chickens, pigeons, and other avians in his book on ornithology (*HN* 10.144–60).[141] There, Pliny reports that in Egypt eggs are not incubated under hens but are instead deposited on dung heaps, presumably to be kept warm by the faeces and southern sun (10.153).[142] The specificity of the reference indicates that the author was still mining Pliny's text for all references to Egypt—large and small—that could be transposed to his *Vita*.

Similarly close reading of Pliny's *Naturalis historia* can be identified as inspiration for a 'a set of colour-changing cups, that is variegated in colour' (*calices … allassontes diversi coloris*) gifted by Hadrian to his sister and brother-in-law, Servianus, at the close of the letter (*Quad. Tyr.* 8.10). Hadrian instructs Servianus and his sister to use the cups, which he claims were presented to him by temple priests, but warns them to ensure that 'our Africanus does not use them indulgently'.[143] As Syme and others have noted, the reference to Africanus' indulgent use of the cups seems to be a joke at the expense of Africanus, a governor of Pannonia Secunda, who was known for his raucous parties, according to Ammianus (15.3.7).[144] However, allusive inspiration for the colour-changing cups has proven harder to determine.[145] The answer once again can be found in the author's evocation of eastern *luxuria* described in the *Naturalis historia*.

Deep within the final Book 37, Pliny describes wondrous Myrrhine vessels, which he reports 'first came to Rome from the East' (*Oriens myrrhina mittit*) after Pliny's victory in the Mithridatic War in 63 BCE (*HN* 37.18–22).[146] Pliny reports that Myrrhine vessels were associated with the kingdom of Parthia and were notable for their great lustre and 'variegated colours' (*varietas colorum*). Though predominantly purple or red, when held to the light these Myrhinne cups

[140] On the implication the Egyptians were displeased with Hadrian's same-sex relationships, see Paschoud (2002) 257.

[141] Paschoud (2002) 257–8. The book also begins with Pliny's description of ostriches' fearsome size and speed (*HN* 10.1), which underscores Firmus' aforementioned ability to ride the intimidating creatures.

[142] Cf. Arist. *Hist. Anim.* 6.2.

[143] *Quad. Tyr.* 8.10: *calices tibi allassontes diversi coloris transmisi, quos mihi sacerdos templi obtulit, tibi et sorori meae specialiter dedicatos, quos tu velim festis diebus conviviis adhibeas. caveas tamen ne his Africanus noster indulgenter utatur.* On Servianus, cf. *Hadr.* 2.6, 8.11, 15.8, 23.2, 23.8, 25.8.

[144] Syme (1968) 66–70, (1971b) 34–8; Rohrbacher (2016) 142; *PLRE* I.26, 'Africanus 3'.

[145] Chastagnol (1970) 92–3 suggests Hadrian's gift was inspired by chalices gifted by Marcella to Jerome in Hier. *Ep.* 44; cf. Paschoud (2002) 257, but the bare mention of gifted chalices seems too minor to be compelling.

[146] Latin text and translation of Pliny's Book 37 derives from Eichholz (1962) 176–81.

revealed prismatic colours akin to a rainbow (37.21–2 *quales in caelesti arcu spectantur*). This beauty, Pliny reports, led Pompey to dedicate Myrrhine vessels as spoils of war at the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus and compelled others to pay handsome sums to possess Myrrhine vessels and calyxes for themselves (37.18–20). Much about the *Historia Augusta*'s 'colour-changing calyxes' (*calices … allassontes diversi coloris*) suggests the author was inspired by Pliny's description of Myrrhine vessels.[147]

The author's description of the cups as *allassontes*—a rare transliteration of the Greek word ἀλλάσσω, which the author feels the need to gloss—deliberately evokes Myrrhine's origins in the far Greek east. Pliny's report that Pompey had dedicated Myrrhine's vessels at the temple of Jupiter also mirrors Hadrian's assertion that he had been gifted the notable calyxes by temple priests. Lastly, Hadrian's campaigns in Parthia, described in the *Vita Hadriani* (5.1–4), provide the necessary pretext for how the author may have come to associate the ruler or his priests with the Parthian cups.[148] However, readers of the *Vita Hadriani* are wise enough to know that Rome's control of Parthia would prove illusory. Regional infighting thwarted annexation of the territory, paving the way for the rebellions of Zenobia, Firmus, and Saturninus to destabilise the broader region in the centuries to follow. Thus, identifying the intertext not only strengthens the author's allusive play with the *Naturalis historia* but also reinforces the *Vita*'s key themes: the allure of foreign *luxuria* and Rome's recurring failures to tame the fractious peoples on the southeastern edges of the *oikoumenē*.

Concluding his coverage of Egypt, the author shifts west and north to discuss Proculus' and Bonosus' rebellions in the lands of Gaul and Germania. Whereas the author previously and correctly linked Proculus' and Bonosus' rebellions with Colonia Agrippina (modern-day Cologne, see *Prob.* 18.5), their rebellions are now transposed to Lugdunum (Lyon) and the banks of the Rhine (*Quad. Tyr.* 13.1, 15.1).[149] These creative liberties allow the author not only to interject allusions to fourth-century events but also to fit the lives of the two usurpers to his geographic *periplus*.[150] Continued attention to paradoxographical minutiae concerning Gaul and Germania is apparent in the life of Proculus, whom Vopiscus inventively attests was a native of the Albingauni, a north Italic people known for their fractious conflicts with Rome in the second

[147] Solinus describes several multi-coloured stones (31.1, 37.11–12), but none are used for cups, limiting their applicability here.

[148] *Hadr.* 4.1, 5.1–4, 12.6–8, 13.8, 21.8–14. On Trajan's and Hadrian's campaigns in Parthia, see Lightfoot (1990); Doležal (2017).

[149] Cf. Eutr. 9.17.1; *Epit.* 37.2; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 37.3.

[150] On the life's allusions, see Syme (1968) 76–7; Chastagnol (1970) 92–3; Paschoud (2002) 274–6, 282–3.

and third centuries BCE (12.1).[151] Vopiscus insists that Proculus had inherited his ancestors' predilection for brigandage, a central theme of the *Vita* (12.1–2, 13.1–2).

In addition to his tendency to fight only in 'brigand-fashion' (12.5, 13.3), Proculus' rapacious nature was supposedly reflected in his sexual appetites. As proof of his proud licentiousness, the author appends a spurious letter in which Proculus brags, 'I have seized one hundred maidens from Sarmatia. Of these I mated with ten in a single night; all of them, however, I made into women, as far as was in my power, in the space of fifteen days' (12.7).[152] As with Firmus' Nilotic escapades, Vopiscus expresses his reluctance to indulge in such unwholesome topics but again justifies the letter's inclusion with the logic that 'all the most trifling things are interesting and bring some pleasure when they are read' (12.6–8 *quoniam minima quaeque iucunda sunt atque habent aliquid gratiae cum leguntur*).[153] This latest affirmation that all knowledge—no matter how trivial—could bring his reader pleasure confirms that Vopiscus has again succumbed to his curious tendencies, despite his familiar reassurance that the biography included only topics that were 'worthy of mention' (*digna memoratu*) at the conclusion of Proculus' life (13.6).[154]

Allusive inspiration for Proculus' sexual conquests has led scholars to the writings of Jerome. Chastagnol and Paschoud have argued the passage mocks Christian appeals to celibacy, such as those made by Jerome in his correspondence with Eustochium, where Jerome laments the number of virgins who are converted into mothers each day (*Ep.* 22.12–3).[155] However, as elsewhere, the primary impetus for the passage instead seems to be another variation on an all-too-familiar paradoxographical and ethnographic trope: interest in the irregular virility and sexual practices of foreign peoples.[156] For those familiar with the *Vita Aureliani*, the enumeration of Proculus' sexual

[151] Dyson (1985) 92–7, 102–3. Paschoud (2002) 266–7 warns that we should not rely on *CIL* V 7791, which attests to a Vibullius Proculus living in the region, as sufficient proof Proculus' family was associated with the region.

[152] *Quad. Tyr.* 12.7: *Proculus Maeciano adfini saentlutem dicit. 'centum ex Sarmatia virgines cepi. ex his una nocte decem inivi; omnes tamen, quod in me erat, mulieres intra dies quindecim reddidi.'*

[153] On the reversal, see Burian (1977) 287; Rohrbacher (2016) 141.

[154] Poignault (2001) 263.

[155] Eustochium's association with the Furii Maecii has also been identified as the inspiration for the letter's purported recipient, Proculus' kinsman Maecianus; Chastagnol (1970) 85–6, 96–8; Paschoud (2002) 270–1, 284; Rohrbacher (2016) 117–18.

[156] E.g., Plin. *HN* 7.23, 29–30, 33. On the theme, see Hall (1991) 201–11; Merrills (2004) 225, 235; Kominko (2016) 374; and Kazantzidis (2019) 13–15. Sexual excess is also associated with Elagabalus and Maximinus, other *mali principes* evoked in the life of Firmus; see Paschoud (2002) 270–1. Bird (1971) 131 alternatively identifies Aesius Proculus, described in Suet. *Cal.* 35.2, as the inspiration for Proculus' exploits.

conquests—ten in a single night, one hundred total in a fortnight—seems more readily intended to draw a contrast with Aurelian's feats on the battlefield. According to the *Vita Aureliani*, Aurelian slew forty-eight Sarmatian men in a single day and over the course of several days slew over 950 (*Aur.* 6.4–5), a far more notable (if still unbelievable) accomplishment than Proculus' carnal liaisons.[157]

Even so, unlocking the full humour of Proculus' supposedly notable accomplishment of copulating with so many Sarmatian women again requires readers' attention to the paradoxographical and ethnographic traditions. As readers of Pliny would know, the Sarmatians were reported to have given birth to the race of men, known as the Sauromatae Gynaecocratumeni, who had married and interbred with the fearsome Amazons (*HN* 6.19). In recognition of this tradition, Sarmatian women were said to hold undue influence over their husbands and to be barred from marrying until they had killed foreign foes in battle.[158] This tradition, therefore, underscores the humour behind Proculus' assertion that his ability to capture and copulate with so many fearsome foreign women was not an act of licentiousness but truly an act of bravery (*Quad. Tyr.* 12.8).

Proculus' uncouth attention to his sexual prowess also provokes another well-trodden paradoxographical joke, this time concerning the inverted gender roles held by foreign peoples.[159] According to the author, while Proculus prided himself on his virility, he was simultaneously dominated by his all-too-masculine Gallic wife (*uxor virago*), Vituriga, nicknamed Samso (*Quad. Tyr.* 12.3). As many have argued, Vituriga's nickname was likely intended to conjure the Nazirite Samson, noted for his hirsute superhuman strength in the Book of Judges, and is fitting on account of Vituriga's masculine demeanour and hairy disposition, characteristics which Ammianus Marcellinus also associated with Gallic women.[160] However, another possible inspiration for the nickname may be the scattered accounts of the Gallic Samnitae (or Namnitae) women who were noted for their strength and were said to live

[157] The *Vita Probi* asserts that Probus also campaigned against the Sarmatians (*Prob.* 5, 12, 19), though as Paschoud (2002) 270 notes, no other source corroborates these claims, suggesting an invented anachronism. Rohrbacher (2016) 140 posits Aurelian's battles with the Sarmatians allude to Theodosius' conflicts with the people described in Amm. Marc. 29.6.15–16.

[158] Hdt. 4.116–17; Str. 7.3.9; cf. Pajón Leyra (2011) 191–4. See also the comments of Nic. Dam. fr. 6, Giannini; Stob. IV.2.30; *Par. Vat.* 28, 48.

[159] Cf. remarks on Zenobia's sexual abstinence (*Tyr. Trig.* 30.12).

[160] Syme (1971a) 26, 68 n. 3; Chastagnol (1994) 1126 n. 1; Paschoud (2002) 268–9. Chastagnol (1970) 83 again sees echoes of Hier. *Ep.* 22.12 which mentions Samson. Chastagnol (1970) 92 and Rohrbacher (2016) 141 assert direct intertexts with Amm. 15.12.1, but the trope's commonness suggests no need for deliberate borrowing between the two authors; cf. Sol. 56.10.

on an island at the mouth of the Loire in an all-female enclave. All contact with men was forbidden except for brief interludes when the women would sail from their island for the sole purpose of conducting intercourse with men, much in the style of the Amazons. Pliny only briefly notes the existence of such women (*HN* 4.107), though more expansive accounts of their exploits can be found elsewhere.[161] In either case, the implication remains that Proculus was a man inevitably drawn to but cowed by fearsome foreign women.

Paradoxographical and ethnographic themes also arise in the Spanish-born, Gallic-Briton Bonosus' biography.[162] Apart from a spurious account of Bonosus' upbringing and rebellion, the remainder of the brief life focuses on Bonosus' thirst for wine, a highly paradoxographical *topos* already discussed above, as well as his marriage to a Gothic noblewoman named Hunila.[163] Like Firmus, Bonosus is said to have been able to drink large quantities of wine while remaining sober, while his foreign foes became drunk and revealed secrets when plied with wine (*Quad. Tyr.* 14.2–5).[164] In Bonosus' case, this faculty is reportedly due to his ability to urinate forcefully on command, preventing him from feeling any discomfort in his stomach or bladder. This remarkable detail the author reports to have found in a *Life of Probus* written by Onesimus, a spurious figure likely inspired by a Constantinian author of oratory, encomia, and history recorded in the *Suda* as Onasimus (O 327).[165]

Like many of the *Vita*'s idiosyncrasies, scholars have identified the author's critique of Christian ascetic lifestyles as the inspiration for Firmus' and Bonosus' penchant for alcohol. Chastagnol has proposed that the two's exploits evoke Ambrose's ruminations on the theme of 'sober drunkenness' (*sobria ebrietas*) and Jerome's descriptions of a monk named Bonosus who attempted to survive on water alone (*Ep.* 3).[166] In a similar vein, Chastagnol

[161] Cf. Str. 4.2.1; Ptol. *Geog.* 2.8.8. I thank the anonymous reviewer who introduced me to this alternative tradition.

[162] On Bonosus' anachronistic description, Paschoud (2002) 277–8, 284–5.

[163] Like Viturigа, Hunila's name indicates her foreignness; see Chastagnol (1970) 87–8, cf. Syme (1968) 37–8; Paschoud (2002) 286; Rohrbacher (2016) 119, 139–40.

[164] *Quad. Tyr.* 14.4–5: *nam si quando legati barbarorum undecumque gentium venissent, ipsi propinabantur, ut eos inebriaret atque ab iis per vinum cuncta cognosceret. ipse quantumlibet bibisset, semper securus et sobrius et, ut Onesimus dicit, scriptor vitae Probi, adhuc in vino prudentior. habuit praeterea rem mirabilem, ut quantum bibisset, tantum mingeret, neque umquam eius aut pectus aut venter aut vesica gravaretur.*

[165] On Onesimus' likely spuriousness, see Chastagnol (1994) cix–cx; Syme (1968) 102; and Paschoud (2002) 272–3.

[166] Chastagnol (1970) 72–8, 83–5, (1976) also proposes 'Onasimus' was inspired by Bonosus' disciple of the same name mentioned in the letter, arguments largely accepted by Sabbah (1978) 426; Poignault (2001) 254–5, 262; Paschoud (2002) 279–82; and Rohrbacher (2016) 112–13, but references to Onesimus recur in other passages without Hieronymian echoes (e.g., *Quad. Tyr.* 13.1; *Car.* 4.2, 7.3, 16.1, 17.3); see Bird (1971) 134.

proposes Bonosus' ability to avoid discomfort in his stomach or bladder by urinating was inspired by Jerome's warnings to Eustochium that immoderate use of wine could lead to stomachache and other ailments (*Ep.* 22.8). However, while the presence of lexical echoes and similar themes suggest the possible influence of Ambrose's or Jerome's writings, readers need not be familiar with Jerome's or Ambrose's writings to understand Bonosus' alcohol consumption. The themes conveyed in Jerome's letters are trite variations on long-running critiques of inebriation. For example, Pliny himself lambasts the moral and physical degradations of alcohol, warning against the consequences of drunken excess including sickness, sore eyes, shaking hands, poor sleep, and forgetfulness (*HN* 14.137–48).

Moreover, catalogues of peripheral peoples' marvellous physical abilities —such as Bonosus' urinary powers—are found throughout the *Naturalis historia* and Solinus' extracts.[167] In describing India and Ethiopia, Pliny describes the Triballes whose glance could kill, the Thibii who could not be drowned, the Italian Hirpi who could walk across coals without being burnt, and the Monocoli ('One-legged men') who were able to jump immense distances with great speed (7.16–23).[168] The author's choice of words—calling Bonosus' forceful urination 'a marvellous ability' (*habuit praeterea rem mirabilem*)—even explicitly evokes the *mirabilia* attributed to foreign subjects by Pliny, Solinus, and other paradoxographers.[169] Vopiscus' subsequent concern for the sartorial minutiae of Hunila's bridal troth, detailed in another false letter (15.4–8), is another clear sign that the author's *alter ego* had—in clear contravention of his tirade against excessive interest in dyes and cloaks mere paragraphs before—again strayed into topics associated not only with overcurious biographers but also with miscellanists like Pliny, whose obtuse interests in dyes, silks, and garments were documented above.[170]

The life ends with one final nod to the obscure minutiae into which 'Vopiscus' has fallen. Vopiscus states,

[167] On the genre's interest in wonders (*thaumata*) of the human body, see Kazantizidis (2019) 24–32.

[168] Beagon (2005) 61–3, 133–45.

[169] Ascetic diets were also described as miraculous marvels; Merrills (2004) 234. Poignault (2001) 264 alternatively sees an allusion to Martial's description of Panaretus, who could expel everything he had drunk (*Ep.* 6.89.7). A multivalent allusion would not be out of place.

[170] Cf. *Macr.* 1.4–5; *Gord.* 21.4. The description of the 'violet-blue … tunics' (*tunicas palliolatas ianthinas*) gifted to Hunila may also be a Plinian homage. Pliny uses the rarely attested *ianthina* to describe a sought-after shade of purple, which Romans valued in expensive dyed garments (*HN* 21.27), but other attestations of the term limit our ability to identify Pliny as the sole referent; cf. Mart. 1.96.4; 2.39.1; *Dig.* 32.70.13; and Paschoud (1989) 225, 227–8. On Pliny's description of the dye, see Wharton (2020) 288–9.

> et potui quidem horum vitam praeterire, quos nemo quaerebat, attamen, ne quid fidei deesset, etiam de his, quae didiceram, intimanda curavi. (*Quad. Tyr.* 15.9)
>
> I might, indeed, have omitted the lives of these men, concerning whom no one has ever inquired, but, in order that there may be no lack of historical faithfulness, I have taken care to make known what I have learned about these also.

Those familiar with Pliny's preface to the *Naturalis historia* can find one last comparison between Vopiscus' and Pliny's endeavours embedded in the biography's closing remarks. Whereas Pliny prides himself on bringing together well-known subjects into a single treatise, a feat which 'no one else had ever attempted' (*praef.* 14 *nemo apud nos qui idem temptaverit*), here the final joke is that Vopiscus has accomplished something even more obscure: he had written a biography of men 'about whom no one had ever inquired' (*quos nemo quaerebat*), solidifying once more his place among the 'excessively inquisitive' *curiosi* berated by Augustine and other contemporaries.[171]

IV. Conclusions

As this article has illustrated, the author of the *Historia Augusta* uses the *Vita Quadrigae Tyrannorum*'s Plinian and paradoxographical allusions as a deliberate structural and thematic programme to parody Vopiscus' fraying commitment to stolid biographical tenets. Through persistent comments that highlight 'curiosity' (*curiositas*) as a defining methodological feature of Vopiscus' lives, readers are primed to view Vopiscus as a biographer at war within himself, promising to report only those things 'worth remembering' (*digna memoratu*) but drawn by the allure of excessive source citation and paradoxographical minutiae long before reaching the *Vita Quadrigae*. Once there, the *Vita Quadrigae*'s combination of direct allusion, summative reference, and inter-discursive appeals to Pliny's *Naturalis historia* and well-known paradoxographical tropes would have served as an obvious indication of Vopiscus' increasingly encyclopaedic and paradoxographical *habitus* for readers immersed in fourth-century popular literature.

Though the author (in the guise of Vopiscus) frequently attempts to distance himself from the Plinian and paradoxographical tenor of the *Vita Quadrigae*, the transparently facetious nature of these denials not only signals the author's humorous metatextual play with reader expectations but also

[171] *HN praef.* 14: *nemo apud nos qui idem temptaverit, nemo apud Graecos, qui unus omnia ea tractaverit*; Beagon (2013) 84–5.

enriches the diegetic cohesion of Vopiscus' methodological *persona* across the five lives assigned to him. Indeed, identifying Vopiscus' progressive transformation from discerning biographer into curious compiler of biographical and paradoxographical minutiae mirrors the author's own evolution across the *Historia Augusta* from a biographer more narrowly focused on imitating and expanding Suetonius' and Marius Maximus' biographical works into a generically innovative and magpie-like author, who adapts and parodies a wide range of novelistic, panegyrical, and paradoxographical conventions in his quest to entertain sophisticated readers in the collection's later lives.

This evolution of Vopiscus' (and thus the author's) endeavour is confirmed once more at the conclusion of the final *Vita Cari*, which immediately follows the *Vita Quadrigae Tyrannorum*. The author—for the last time in the guise of 'Vopiscus'—bequeaths the collection to his reader, asking his friend to

> habe, mi amice, meum munus, quod ego, ut saepe dixi, non eloquentiae causa sed curiositatis in lumen edidi, id praecipue agens, ut, si quis eloquens vellet facta principum reserare, materiam non requireret, habiturus meos libellos ministros eloquii. (*Car.* 21.2)
>
> accept this gift of mine, which, as I have often said, I have brought out to the light of day, not because of its elegance of style but because of its curiosity, chiefly with this purpose in view, that if any gifted stylist should wish to reveal the deeds of the emperors, he might not lack the material, having, as he will, my little books as ministers to his eloquence.

In addition to reaffirming his rejection of elegant style,[172] Vopiscus' concluding assertion that the summation of his work is not a discerning biographical sketch but a 'curious' compilation of odd facts about Rome's rulers highlights the *Historia Augusta*'s transformation into something more akin to an encyclopaedic and biographical reference work, written for more eloquent writers to mine.

In addition to enriching our understanding of the author's methodologies and varied intertexts, identifying the author's efforts to align Firmus and his companions with paradoxographical 'types' of Egyptians, Gauls, Spaniards, and Britons also has thematic repercussions for the collection's final exploration of usurpation. Superficially, these caricatures confirm the author's derogatory views of Egyptians, Gauls, and other foreigners found throughout the collection and reflect contemporary anxieties about racial mixing and the influence of non-Roman bloodlines on imperial politics.[173] Underneath Firmus

[172] Sogno (2012) 82–3.

[173] Timonen (1991); Paschoud (1997); Poignault (2001); Moralee (2008) 65–73.

and his companions' ribald antics, however, readers can also detect the author's attempts to assuage readers' anxieties about the fragmentation of the Empire's periphery in the third and fourth centuries CE.[174] As the work of J. Clarke, A. Merrills, and C. Barrett has shown, while the pygmy-Nilotic landscapes evoked in Firmus' marvellous feats of crocodile husbandry could amuse and titillate viewers, they also served essential apotropaic and imperialist functions by reinforcing Roman colonial worldviews of a civilised centre ringed by a barbarous periphery.[175] Similar imperialistic aims have been attributed to Pliny's *Naturalis historia* and other paradoxographical works, which identify Rome's 'possession and control of the marvels of nature' as a central demonstration of the Empire's 'control over the remote' outskirts of the known world.[176]

Within the *Historia Augusta*, Firmus and his companions' elision with their paradoxographical counterparts serves a similarly triumphalistic, imperialistic aim. Enshrining usurpers of Firmus and his companions' ilk as naturally occurring *mirabilia* at the edges of civilisation undermines explanations that the repeated usurpations of the third and fourth centuries were a symptom of Rome's internal, systemic weaknesses or a result of Aurelian's or Probus' personal or strategic failings. Conversely, by aligning Firmus and the life's other usurpers with their paradoxographical counterparts, the author implies interactions with such 'wild' and 'undomesticated' creatures were an unavoidable byproduct of a geographically expansive Empire. This message stands in stark contrast to that found in the earlier *Vita Triginta Tyrannorum*, which blames the remarkable number of usurpers during Gallienus' reign on his personal, moral failings.[177] The elision of Firmus and his companions with barbaric wonders of the periphery, therefore, allowed the author to exonerate Aurelian and Probus of the failings of their predecessor and to reframe potential points of critique into testaments to Aurelian's and Probus's imperialistic success.

Moreover, by recasting usurpation as the unavoidable collision of Rome's civilised world with the inborn restiveness of foreign populations, the author distills usurpation into a more predictable and thus more manageable phenomenon: despite temporary setbacks, Rome's civilised world would always dominate the exotic threats posed by the uncivilised and monstrous periphery at the edges of the Empire. Thus, the paradoxographical tenor of the *Vita Quadrigae Tyrannorum* also serves as an important bookend, casting a more

[174] Humphries (2009) 103.

[175] Clarke (2007) 67–107; Merrills (2017) 279–96; Barrett (2019) 335–9.

[176] Naas (2011) 59–65; Murphy (2004) 7–11, 129–64. Taming and classifying natural *thaumata* held similar 'ideological import' in the Ptolemaic court; see Lightfoot (2021) 52–7.

[177] Grey (2010) 88, 95–9.

hopeful tone for Rome's continued future in the collection's last exploration of the theme of usurpation. This more hopeful narrative of Rome's future security segues into the author's concluding reflection on the inherently cyclical nature of Rome's prosperity in the final *Vita Cari* (*Car.* 1–3) and signals the author's intention to compose a thematically cohesive and reassuring conclusion for the *Historia Augusta*'s later lives despite their many 'trivial' and 'miscellaneous' tendencies. Together, these findings illustrate the importance of continued analysis of the *Historia Augusta*'s frequently maligned later lives, which prove far more valuable testaments to the author's historical and biographical aims than their spurious historicity initially suggests.

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