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Appetite for Mazzards: Referencing History in the Pliny's *HN* 15. 102*

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The following analysis concerns Pliny's excursus on mazzard (sweet cherry) cultivation in Rome in the Book 15 of the *Historia naturalis*. Pliny links their introduction and spread to the conquests of the Roman army under the command of illustrious general and bon vivant L. Licinius Lucullus. The confrontation of Pliny's narrative with other sources, as well as with the findings of contemporary researchers, indicate that Lucullus could not have been the first discoverer of the mazzard and the chronological information Pliny gives should be treated with special caution. Most relevantly, Athenaeus of Naucratis invoked the same tradition, according to which Lucullus was also the author of the name of the mazzard (Greek κεράσια, Latin *cerasia*), to mock the tendency of the Romans to attribute Greek achievements to themselves. Pliny's embellished argument, however, aligns perfectly with his Romanocentric and imperialist world picture. As an eminent historian, naturalist and official of the Roman Empire, he used certain passages in his immense encyclopaedia as a departure point to present idealistically the successes of the Roman army and its culture-forming role. In this context, Pliny's description of the discovery and spread of mazzard cultivation serves as another illustration of the genius of the Romans and the power of their empire.

Keywords: Pliny the Elder, Natural History, Roman History, Roman historical exempla.

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Within Roman agricultural texts including historical content one stands out and demands our special attention — *Historia naturalis* by Pliny the Elder, a remarkable outlier within the body of the Roman erudite literature and a treasure trove of intriguing references to the Roman past. The sheer scope, detail and ostensibly chaotic complexity of this work¹ compelled many a historian to treat *Historia naturalis* as an ‘bottomless vessel trivium,’ ready to be consulted at leisure without concern for its context.² Although some experts continue to hold derogatory views on Pliny, others have begun to defend the value of *Historia* — a shift of perspective brought about partly by a growing scholarly interest in Pliny’s prose *sensu stricto*³ / the Roman erudite literature *sensu lato* and partly by sustained methodological reflection about the relationship between literature and history. One insufficiently researched aspect of Pliny’s work concerns his use of historical content in *Historia naturalis*, an issue of direct consequence to the present analysis.⁴ The purpose of what follows is to illuminate how Pliny’s work employs historical content, focusing on his excursus on the Roman cultivation of mazzards.

In Book 15 of Pliny the Elder’s *Historia naturalis* we read an intriguing passage on mazzard (sweet cherry) horticulture in Rome:⁵

*Cerasia ante victoriam Mithridaticam L. Luculli non fuere in Italia, ad urbem annum DCLXXX. Is primum invexit e Ponto, annisque CXX trans oceanum in Britanniam usque pervenere; eadem [ut diximus] in Aegypto nulla cura potuere gigni.*⁶

“Before the victory of Lucius Lucullus in the war against Mithridates, that is down to 74 b. c., there were no cherry-trees in Italy. Lucullus first imported them from Pontus, and in 120 years they have crossed the ocean and got as far as Britain; but all the same no attention has succeeded in getting them to grow in Egypt.”⁷

Pliny opens his reflection with a statement that even though the Romans encountered mazzards only after Lucullus⁸ defeated Mithridates, that is, in year 680 a. U. c (74 BC), their cultivation spread relatively quickly and after 120 years (by 47 CE) they

¹ Nevertheless, Pliny himself warns that his encyclopedia was a compendium to be dipped into, not a work of literature to be enjoyed in its entirety (*Praef.* 33); cf. Pascucci 1982, 173.

² The text-as-a-vessel metaphor (*contentitore saccheggiate*) coined by M. I. Gulletta in her work on Athenaeus (1989) was popularized by other scholars researching the Roman erudite literature, e. g. Murphy 2004, 11 (“The *Natural History* was never a pure vessel for transmitting knowledge, created in a vacuum for its own sake”) and Formisano 2018, 493 (“Yet a text cannot be reduced to a mere instrument whose primary function is simply to transmit knowledge and instructions on how to apply it”); cf. also Laehn 2013, 5.

³ The recent fifty years have seen a growth of interest in *Historia*’s programmatic underpinnings, analyzed through the lens of morality, philosophy, politics and rhetoric: see especially König, Winkler (ed.) 1979; the collection *Plinio il Vecchio sotto il profilo storico e letterario* (Como 1982); French, Greenaway (ed.) 1986; Serbat 1986 (the most comprehensive, if somewhat dated, analysis); 2011; Pigeaud, Oroz 1987; Isager 1991; Citroni Marchetti 1991; 2003; 2011; Beagon 1992; de Oliveira 1992 (de Oliveira’s work helpfully collects an index of Plinian references to specific political and moral motifs); Naas 2002; Murphy 2004; Carey 2006; Doody 2010; Gibson, Morello (ed.) 2011; Laehn 2013.

⁴ Cf. Cotta Ramosino 2004, 9–11. Jal (1987, 487) rightly observes that, since we lost all historical treatises of Pliny, we can appraise his historical competence only by analyzing relevant content in *Historia naturalis*. On history in the Pliny’s *Natural history* see also Kołoczek 2019, 101–154.

⁵ For the current taxonomy of *Prunus* species, see Faust, Surányi 1996, 264–271, whom I follow to claim that Pliny and other authors discussed in this article meant sweet cherries, herewith called mazzards.

⁶ Plin. *HN* 15. 102.

⁷ Trans. by H. Rackham.

⁸ On L. Licinius Lucullus, consul in 74 BC see Bucher 2016.

grew in British orchards. The preceding passage exemplifies Pliny's style: elliptical, abstruse and imprecise in dating, it poses considerable difficulties for historians looking to employ Plinian data. While Pliny designates 74 BC as the year when mazzards first appeared in Rome, the remainder of the passage sketches the historical context of this event only in the barest detail. Were one to interpret Pliny's words as-is, one could assume that the Mithridatic Wars ended with Lucullus' victory in 74 BC. Nevertheless, other sources suggest that Lucullus was to travel to the East only in 73 BC, thus after his consulship in 74 BC.⁹ This chronological discrepancy constitutes only one infelicity found within this passage.

Other controversy stirred by the Plinian excursus touches upon the Latin name of mazzards (*cerasia*). Athenaeus recounts that the Roman authors derived *cerasium* from a Pontic town, Cerasus, with Lucullus supposedly bringing *cerasia* to Rome after his campaigns:

Φησὶν ὁ παρὰ τῷ ῥήτορι Λαρήνσιος: ‘πολλὰ ὑμεῖς οἱ Γραικοὶ ἐξειδιοποιεῖσθε ὡς αὐτοὶ ἢ ὀνομάσαντες ἢ πρῶτοι εὐρόντες: ἀγνοεῖτε δὲ ὅτι Λεύκολλος ὁ Ῥωμαίων στρατηγός, ὁ τὸν Μιθριδάτην καὶ Τιγράνην καταγωνισάμενος, πρῶτος διεκόμισεν εἰς Ἰταλίαν τὸ φυτὸν τοῦτο ἀπὸ Κερασσοῦντος Ποντικῆς πόλεως, καὶ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ καὶ τὸν καρπὸν καλέσας κέρασον ὁμωνύμως τῇ πόλει, ὡς ἱστοροῦσιν οἱ ἡμέτεροι συγγραφεῖς.¹⁰

“Larensius at the Rhetorician [id est Athenaeus] says: ‘You Greeks make claims to many things, as if you had either named them yourself or were the first to discovered them. But you forget that Lucullus, the Roman commander, who defeated Mithridates and Tigranes, first brought this plant to Italy from the Pontic city of Cerasus. He, too, is the one who named the fruit κέρασον after the city's name, as our historians report.’”¹¹

Cerasus sat relatively close to Cabira, a site of Lucullus' decisive victory over Mithridates' forces (72/71 BC) that opened up his way into the kingdom of Pontus.¹² The most economic (and charitable) interpretation would read the passage as Pliny's shorthand for the context of introducing mazzards into Italy, with Pliny's sentence to be read as

⁹ See esp. Cic. *Clu.*, 90, 108 with 136–137, who confirms that Lucullus was present in Rome as consul late in November 74, and App. *Mith.* 70, who places first campaign events “in the beginning of spring”, which could only relate to the 73 BC. On this issue see Sherwin-White 1994: 234. Intriguingly, the majority of popular publications on horticulture (including the Wikipedia) uncritically cite the Plinian narration and claim that Lucullus brought mazzards to Rome in 74 BC (although some authors do note the historical discrepancy and provide 72 BC in its place).

¹⁰ Ath. 2. 50f–51a. See also Tert. *Apol.* 11.8: *Ceterum si propterea Liber deus, quod vitem demonstravit, male cum Lucullo actum est, qui primus cerasia ex Ponto Italiae promulgavit, quod non est propterea consecratus ut frugis novae auctor, qui ostensor*, which seems to refer to the same tradition. Tertullian, however, makes no mention of Lucullus as the author of the tree's name.

¹¹ Trans. by B. J. Koloczek.

¹² Refer in particular to Sherwin-White (1984, 171–172; 1994, 237–238), who dates the introduction of mazzards to Rome to 71 BC. Our chief source on chronology of Lucullus' campaign against Mithridates is a brief remark by Phlegon of Tralles in *Ol.* 12, 3 (FGrH, 2b 257). According to Phlegon, Lucullus (after having begun the siege of Amissos) overwintered the turn of 72/71 BC near Cabira (as correlated with the date of the 177th Olympics). In contrast to Sherwin-White's claims, Phlegon does not imply that the Battle of Cabira took place in 71 BC; the author merely relates that Lucullus ordered his legate Hadrian to reengage Mithridates, a maneuver which ended in a successful skirmish against the Pontic king's forces (cf. Plut. *Luc.* 17–18, 1 and App. *Mith.* 79–82, who provide more detail but do not date these events). Another surprising claim frequently appearing in the scholarly literature on the Battle of Cabira dates it to summer (see e. g. a new edition of fragments of Sallust's *Histories* by Ramsay 2015, 347, who erroneously refers to Plutarch as the source of this information), even though no ancient author mentions when exactly the battle took place.

follows: “Mazzards came to Italy after Lucullus’ victory in war with Mithridates, [which took place] about 680 a. U. c.” Nonetheless Pliny goes on to use this date to define the time when mazzards came to Britain. No obvious association ties Pliny’s date of 47 AD to Claudius’ conquest of Britain, to begin in 43 BC. Perhaps mazzards came to Britain with the island’s second governor, Publius Ostorius Scapula (in office between 47 and 52 AD); more likely, Pliny rounds off the given interval to 120 years (*annisque CXX*) since he has no means to establish the precise chronology. Probably the first date (*ad urbis annum DCLXXX*) was also approximate, but it results more from the historical context than the text itself.¹³

Chronological discrepancies aside, the Plinian excursus on mazzards contains further and graver factual defects. Athenaeus relays that mazzards, both high-growing and dwarf varieties, grew in European orchards at least since the time of Theophrastus of Ephesus (*ca.* 370–287 BC), in addition, under the same name allegedly given to them by Lucullus (κεράσια).¹⁴ Athenaeus’ claim, therefore, contradicts Roman statement that Lucullus was the real discoverer of cherries and points to an earlier introduction date.¹⁵ We could assume that the discovery of mazzards should have been associated not with the expedition of Lucullus, but with Alexander the Great, were it not for the fact that the Macedonian’s army never reached the Pontus. On that account some scholars claim that the city of Cerasus took its name from mazzards grown in its vicinity and not *vice versa*.¹⁶ This stopgap hypothesis, however, neither solves problems found within the Plinian passage nor elucidates the manner by which mazzards came to Europe and even more so to Italy.

Of great relevance to this matter is once again the aforementioned passage from Athenaeus (unfortunately surviving only in a much later Byzantine extract from the 10th or 11th century) that depicts two learned banqueters discussing the origin of mazzard cultivation in the Mediterranean (this time quoted *in extenso*):

Φησὶν ὁ παρὰ τῷ ῥήτορι Λαρήνσιος: ‘πολλὰ ὑμεῖς οἱ Γραικοὶ ἐξιδιοποιεῖσθε ὡς αὐτοὶ ἢ ὀνομάσαντες ἢ πρῶτοι εὐρόντες: ἀγνοεῖτε δὲ ὅτι Λεύκολλος ὁ Ῥωμαίων στρατηγός, ὁ τὸν Μιθριδάτην καὶ Τιγράνην καταγωνισάμενος, πρῶτος διεκόμισεν εἰς Ἰταλίαν τὸ φυτὸν τοῦτο ἀπὸ Κερασούντος Ποντικῆς πόλεως. καὶ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ καὶ τὸν καρπὸν καλέσας κέρασον ὁμωνύμως τῇ πόλει, ὡς ἰστοροῦσιν οἱ ἡμέτεροι συγγραφεῖς. Πρὸς δὲν Δάφνος

¹³ Theoretically, it could be assumed that preposition *ad* was used by Pliny in the sense of “nearly” or “around”, but then it would have to perform two functions simultaneously, i.e. to indicate the extent of time up to the Lucullus’ victory, as well as an undefined point in time when this victory took place. To adopt the first meaning would also require changing the order of the whole sentence to: *Cerasia ante victoriam Mithridaticam L. Luculli ad urbis annum DCLXXX non fuere in Italia*. Cf. the English trans. by H. Rackham (LCL): “Before the victory of Lucius Lucullus in the war against Mithridates, that is down to 74 b.c., there were no cherry-trees in Italy”, the French trans. by J. André (Les Belles Lettres): “Le cerisier n’existait pas en Italie avant la victoire de L. Lucullus sur Mithridate, jusqu’en 680 de Rome” and the German transl. by R. König and G. Winkler (Tusculum): “Kirschbäume gab es in Italien nicht vor dem Sieg des L. Lucullus über Mithridates, bis zum Jahre 680 der Stadt [74 v. Chr.]”.

¹⁴ Ath. 2. 50b–e. Cf. Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 3.13.1–3.

¹⁵ Of course, it is possible that they for many years, if not centuries, could have been growing in Europe, and Lucullus just brought them to Italy from Asia. Nevertheless, Pliny, when describing cherries and their distribution by the Romans all the way to the farthest corners of their empire (in the provinces of Britannia, Lusitania, Belgica, Macedonia and even Egypt), does not mention about the earlier cultivation of this tree at all.

¹⁶ See Faust, Surányi 1996, 271.

τίς φησιν: ἄλλὰ μὴν παμπόλλοις χρόνοις πρεσβύτερος Λευκόλλου ἀνὴρ ἐλλόγιμος Δίφιλος ὁ Σίφνιος, γεγονώς κατὰ Λυσίμαχον τὸν βασιλέα — εἰς δὲ οὗτος τῶν Ἀλεξάνδρου διαδόχων — μνημονεῦει τῶν κερασιῶν λέγων: ‘τὰ κεράσια εὐστόμαχα, εὐχυλα, ὀλιγότροφα, ἐκ ψυχροῦ δὲ λαμβανόμενα εὐστόμαχα. καλλίω δὲ τὰ ἐρυθρότερα καὶ τὰ Μιλήσια: εἰσὶ γὰρ διουρητικά.’¹⁷

“Larensius at the Rhetorician [id est Athenaeus] says: ‘You Greeks make claims to many things, as if you had either named them yourself or were the first to discover them. But you forget that Lucullus, the Roman commander, who defeated Mithridates and Tigranes, first brought this plant to Italy from the Pontic city of Cerasus. He, too, is the one who named the fruit κέρασον after the city’s name, as our historians report’. Then, he was answered by a certain Daphnus: ‘and yet, Diphilus of Siphnos, a famous man who lived during the reign of king Lysimachus, one of Alexander’s successors, centuries older than Lucullus, mentions cherries [κεράσια], saying: cherries are tasty, juicy, but not very nutritious; easy to digest, eaten immediately after being taken out of cold water. The darker ones and those of Miletus are better; they have a diuretic effect.’”¹⁸

The quoted dialogue has the banquet host, a Roman erudite called Publius Livius Larensius, publicly humiliated by a Greek doctor, Daphnus of Ephesus (thus, ostensibly, not an authority on history) — apparently, a direct jab at Pliny’s tall story about the origin of mazzards. While it remains uncertain whether Larensius meant Pliny when he referred to the Roman historians who wrote on mazzards, Larensius most surely refers to the same tradition that credits the famed general and bon vivant Lucullus with bringing mazzards to Rome. Since Athenaeus’ information on the history of mazzard culture comes from Theophrastus, it directly invalidates Pliny’s story about Lucullus. Markedly, Pliny draws from Theophrastus’ works when discussing plants; as such, he must have known that Theophrastus mentioned mazzard cultivation in Europe and Lucullus could not have brought them over from Asia. Furthermore, it should be noted that Larensius’ presumption about Roman supremacy and Daphnis’ response seem to fit well with the Plinian tendency to belittle Greek achievements or ascribe them to the Romans.¹⁹

Notably, Pliny’s cultural effrontery comes to the forefront when he boldly claims that most varieties of mazzards bear names after famed Roman citizens (*Lutatia*, *Caeciliania*, *Iuniana*, and even *Pliniana*, reportedly called so by the Campanians)²⁰. Both Larensius and Pliny’s statements praise the might of the Roman military that overthrew two powerful Eastern kings. Daphnis’ retort-to offhandedly mention the extraordinary conquests of Alexander the Great and his successors—perfectly tempers Larensius’ outrageous words and disproves any Roman claim on the discovery of mazzards. A specialist on diets, Daphnis caps his retort by noting that salubrious qualities of mazzards had already been known to Diphilus at the beginning of the 3rd c. BC. Indeed, the modern botanical research indicates that mazzard cultivation in the Mediterranean began long

¹⁷ Ath. 2. 50f–51b.

¹⁸ Transl. by B. J. Kołoczek.

¹⁹ For more information on Pliny’s cultural chauvinism, see Carey 2006, 24–25. Serbat (1987, 594–598) claims that Pliny not so much disliked the Greeks as a group but distrusted those who believed in superstition and magic, such as some Greek physicians. In turn, Isager (1991, 228) argues that the Plinian dislike of the Greeks by and large played into a literary motif that juxtaposed Greek *otium* against Roman *negotium*. The modern scholarly consensus tends to underscore Pliny’s nationalist tendencies.

²⁰ Plin. *HN* 15. 102–103.

before Lucullus.²¹ Other Roman agronomists corroborate the early introduction date for this tree. Varro, writing thirty years after Lucullus' campaign against Mithridates, treats mazzards as common and casually mentions that they should be grafted around the winter solstice,²² which either directly disproves Pliny's introduction date in the 70s BC or, quite improbably, implies that mazzards dominated Italian orchards in less than thirty years.

In sum, one can conjecture two interpretations of Pliny's passage on mazzards. First, Pliny might have made a mistake: having misread his sources, he believed that Lucullus brought mazzards to Rome whereas Lucullus only brought some new variety of a well-known and widely-cultivated fruit tree.²³ Second, Pliny might have deliberately obfuscated the truth to spin a story that would add to the glory of Rome and its civilizing efforts. I tend to favour the second explanation, since it falls into a pattern prevalent in Pliny's encyclopaedia: Rome overshadows all nations and bears the burden of spreading civilization to the ends of the earth. Pliny adopts a similar approach when purposefully describing the German tribe of Chauci as uncivilized and in dire need of Roman cultural enrichment.²⁴ In other words, Pliny might have wanted to rhapsodize Roman conquests, bringing prosperity to conquered lands by facilitating the cultivation of exotic mazzards, from one end of the Empire to another.²⁵ Furthermore, to ascribe the honour of the fruit's discovery to the Romans would take it away from the Greeks, whom Pliny noticeably disliked.

No matter which interpretation we choose, care must be taken when using Pliny's encyclopaedia as a historical source. Pliny's arranged his material to fit his world picture, either to laud *mos maiorum* of ancient Roman heroes or to give an air of verisi-

²¹ For cultivation of mazzards and (sour) cherries in antiquity, see Faust, Surányi 1996, 271–280, especially 273.

²² Varro, *Rust.* 1. 39.

²³ Faust, Surányi 1996, 272–274.

²⁴ See *HN* 16. 2–4, where Pliny depicts the squalor of the Germanic Chauci (*misera gens*) with words strongly resembling colonialist treatises: “And yet these nations, if this very day they were vanquished by the Roman people, would exclaim against being reduced to slavery! Be it so, then—Fortune is most kind to many, just when she means to punish them.” (*Et hae gentes, si vincantur hodie a populo Romano servire se dicunt! Ita est profecto: multis fortuna parcat in poenam*). Relevantly, Pliny's descriptions of barbarians in *Historia naturalis* classify them by their degree of Romanization and fluency in Latin. In *HN* 5. 1, the encyclopaedist disparages the tribes of Atlantes: calling their words ineffable (*ineffabilia*), he claims that “they have lost all characteristics of humanity” (5. 45, *degeneres sunt humani ritus*), “for there is no mode of distinguishing each other among them by names” (*neque nominum ullorum inter se ipsos appellatio est*) (trans. Bostock and Riley). See also Carey 2004, 35–36 and Murphy 2004, 165, 169–174, who stresses that our archaeological knowledge on the Chauci belies Pliny's primitivist propaganda: since Pliny met the Chauci during his military service, he knowingly misrepresented their society. Similarly, Fear (2011, 27–29) draws our attention to the positive, almost idealistic depiction of the Chauci in Tacitus' *Germania* (*Germ.* 35): Tacitus knew Pliny's work but adopted a different ideological program. Pliny adopts a “colonialist” outlook and vilifies simple lives of the Chauci as ignorant and in need of the imperial edification, whereas Tacitus stereotypes the Chauci as noble savages, a cultural misrepresentation already rampant well before the early modern period. *Pace* Fear, it is difficult to accept that Pliny's testimony on the Chauci, informed by his personal experiences, has more basis in fact than the glorifying account of armchair historian Tacitus. Both authors construe accounts that align with their ideological orientations: see also Laehn 2013, 40–42.

²⁵ See Healy 1999, 48–49; Murphy 2004, 23, 154–156; Carey 2006, 37–38; Ash 2011, 7–8; Naas 2011, 59. Laehn 2013, 57–58 underscores the importance of Pliny's account of the triumph of Pompey the Great (*HN* 3. 18; 7. 95; 37. 13) as a paradigmatic piece of propaganda, lauding Rome's military and cultural supremacy; cf. Della Corte 1978, 11–12.

militude to a constructed piece of pro-Roman propaganda about Lucullus' chance discovery of mazzards in the East. It seems that Plinian references to former triumphs of Rome (especially those of the Republican era) meant to lend considerable weight to his message of the greatness of the Empire and its luminaries. Carefully crafted anecdotes on famous Roman personages became therefore a cornerstone of Pliny's programmatic praise of Roman imperialism.

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