As an inquiry into nature, the Naturalis Historia is a work of knowledge and on knowledge. As a work written by a servant of the Roman emperor, it is also influenced by an imperialistic perspective. At the time of its composition, Roman culture manifested a strong interest in all kinds of mirabilia. In the Naturalis Historia, imperialism, knowledge and mirabilia share complex links, and this paper aims at clarifying some of them.

Imperialism has often proved to be a motor for the conquest of knowledge. Discoveries of new territories and practices lead also to an interest in all sorts of extraordinary things and beings. The Naturalis Historia illustrates both the appropriation of nature and knowledge by the Romans, and the fascination with mirabilia. According to Pliny, these exemplify the power of Nature and force Man to regain the respect he has lost for her. Mirabilia are also a means of praising imperialism, as imperial control over nature and her marvels reflects on the greatness of Rome. That is why, in the Naturalis Historia, the mirabilia of Rome surpass those of the world: Rome is shown to be the centre of a dominated world, where the centre absorbs and replaces the periphery. Nevertheless, the interest in mirabilia also reveals a decline of knowledge, even despite peace and well-being provided by the Empire. The reason for this might well be the loss of libertas, which Pliny denounces in veiled terms. In this context, mirabilia can be thought of as a compensation for the people.

Imperialism and the Conquest of Knowledge

One of the main contributions of recent works on Pliny the Elder is to show the ideological value of the Naturalis Historia. This encyclopaedic
work proves to be an inventory, for the glory of Rome, of the resources available in the Roman world, which is assimilated to the *orbis terrarum*.\(^2\)

This ideological aspect appears clearly in the subtitles of recent monographs on the *Naturalis Historia*, such as *The Empire in the Encyclopedia* or *Art and Empire in the ‘Natural History’*: Trevor Murphy shows that ethnographic exploration allows us to reconstitute the Roman world in a book;\(^3\) Sorcha Carey demonstrates that the chapters on art history, although mainly about the Greek world, form *Pliny’s Catalogue of Culture*, an inventory of works appropriated by Rome and of the Roman tastes.\(^4\)

Furthermore, in recent decades, historians have demonstrated the relation between imperialism and the progress of knowledge at different times and in various fields.\(^5\) Medicine in the Hellenic world is one example. This relationship has also been, for instance, intensely researched as far as British colonialism in the 19th century is concerned.\(^6\)

These observations are supported by Pliny who comments on the interest of several rulers in the conquest of knowledge as well as territories. The most famous example is Alexander, who gave the task of managing scientific investigation to Aristotle, whose work Pliny himself has now brought up to date (*HN* 8.44):

Alexandro Magno rege inflammato cupidine animalium naturas noscendi delegataque hac commentione Aristotelii, summo in omni doctrina iuro, aliquid milia hominum in totius Asiae Graeciaeque tractu parere ei iussa ... ne quid usquam genitum ignoraretur ab eo. Quos percurtando quinquaginta ferme uolumina illa praecrara de animalibus condidit. Quae a me collecta in artum cum iis quae ignorauerat quaesu ut legentes boni consulant, in uniuersis rerum naturae operibus medioque clarissimi regum omnium desiderio cura nostra breuiter peregrinantes.

King Alexander the Great being fired with a desire to know the natures of animals and having delegated the pursuit of this study to Aristotle as a man of supreme eminence in every branch of science, orders were given to some thousands of persons throughout the whole of Asia and Greece ... so that he might not fail to be informed about any creature born anywhere. His enquiries addressed to those persons resulted in the composition of his famous works of zoology, in nearly fifty volumes. To my compendium of these, with the addition of facts unknown to him, I request my readers

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\(^2\) See Naas (2002), especially 418–421.

\(^3\) Murphy (2004).

\(^4\) Carey (2003).
