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Encyclopaedism and Genre in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*

This paper sets out to break down the consensus that Pliny's *Natural History* provides 'an encyclopaedia of all contemporary knowledge' (*OCD*³) and to re-open the question of the genre politics of ancient scholarly production. The starting point will be Gian Biagio Conte's influential article, 'The Inventory of the World: Form of Nature and Encyclopedic Project in the Work of Pliny the Elder' in his 1994 collection, *Genres and Readers*.

Conte's theoretical model of the reader–addressee in the text leads to a formulation of genres which are timeless to the point of being ahistorical. Encyclopaedism is a problematic concept that becomes a self-aware literary genre at a much later period in the history of western literature, as is suggested by the fact that 'encyclopaedia' only begins to appear as a book title in the sixteenth century with the publication of Paul Scaliger's *Encyclopaedia, seu orbis terrarum* in 1559. However Conte mobilises the *HN* to provide a model of ancient encyclopaedism analogous to Lucretian didactic or Ovidian elegy. The idea of encyclopaedism, as slippage between book and general culture, provides a uniquely useful forum in which to understand the intellectual stance of Pliny's *HN*, but we need a conception of encyclopaedism at once broader and more specific than Conte's: Broader, since we need to mobilise new evaluations of the politics of encyclopaedic writing and its relationship to the culture which produces it; More specific, because we need to establish the locus of any collision between books and ideals of general culture in antiquity.

My argument will rest on a comparative examination of the *HN* with the style and format of extant works of Cato and Varro, two other prominent Roman 'encyclopaedists'. In the absence of generic cohesion in their writing, the search for similarities will focus on the image of all three as Roman Polymaths. This image of the Polymath, the scholar who has studied all the branches of ancient knowledge, is already a heroic one in Seneca and Quintilian's writing on the *artes liberales* or *enkuklios paideia*, where, I argue, the figure of the polymath guarantees the achievability of the educational goals which are being championed. It is largely via the dubious etymological link with an educational system of *enkuklios paideia* that the modern genre of the encyclopaedia has been assigned a place in the horizons of expectations of first century readers. The nexus of etymology, hindsight and speculation that informs the assumption of the encyclopaedia into the canon of ancient genres needs to be unpicked before we can reassess the place of the *Historia Naturalis* in the cultural landscape of imperial Rome.