
Pliny the Elder's Natural History: The Empire in the Encyclopaedia
by Trevor Murphy

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The monumental *Natural History* of the Elder Pliny (AD 23–79) in 37 books was one of the most influential works of the pre-scientific era. It survived intact, despite its great size, defying the fate of comparable ancient and medieval works. By the 20th century, it had been published in nearly 300 complete or partial editions. As a scientific work, however, its factual accuracy was increasingly challenged. At the end of the 16th century, Sir Francis Bacon was calling for a complete overhaul of ‘the opinions and conjectures of the ancients’ and the institution of a large-scale project to collect fresh data from scratch, a project which, he warned in a letter of 1622, might ‘fill six times as many volumes as Pliny’s history... which includes nevertheless a great many things belonging to philology, to fable, to antiquity and not to Nature’.¹ Indeed, succeeding centuries became increasingly unsympathetic, not only to the perceived unreliability of the *Natural History*’s factual material, but also to its bewildering diversity and apparent lack of overall rationale.

It is only in the last 15 years or so that scholars have sought to reassess Pliny’s work. Recent studies have concentrated on the text as a coherent entity, the creation of an author who was himself the product of his time. Trevor Murphy’s lively, learned, and well-written study is the most recent of several interesting analyses of Pliny’s text as a cultural document which defined and encapsulated the assumptions and aspirations of its era. Such an approach to Pliny is particularly fruitful. His descriptions of the elements of

¹ ... *impleantur volumina quae historiam C. Plinii sextuplicent... in qua tamen ipsa plurima philologica, fabulosa, antiquitatis non naturae...* [Spedding, Ellis, and Heath 1857–1874, 14.376, trans. 14.377]

nature frequently go beyond factual description to include their roles in human society generally and Roman society in particular. Complexes of interlinked references relating to agriculture, manufacture, medicine, religion, magic, history, geography, and ethnography explain, in effect, not what a laurel tree, an elephant, or iron was, but what they meant to a Roman of the first century AD.

One particular aspect of this ‘meaning’ which has been attracting increasing attention is the relationship between Pliny’s encyclopedic work and the totalizing embrace of Rome’s empire. The *Natural History* can be read as a catalogue of empire and an expression of its optimism and power, an approach which colors two other recent studies [Naas 2002, Carey 2003] which appeared too late to be taken into account in the present volume. It is Murphy’s work, however, which devotes itself entirely to this theme or, more specifically, to the question of power as encapsulated by the empire and the relationship of that power to knowledge of the natural world. It does so, moreover, with regard not only to the general content of the *Natural History*, but also to its structure, in an attempt to explain how and why Pliny selects and arranges his material as he does.

A successful military man and imperial administrator, Pliny represented the known natural world as more or less co-extensive with the Roman empire of the first century AD. For Murphy, Pliny’s manner of representing nature in the *Natural History* is shaped on many levels by the culture of imperial power. In the first part of his study, he examines this relationship with regard to the structure of the text and considers the question of knowledge and power in general terms. The second part explores the portrayal of peoples and places in their relation to the imperial theme, chapter 3 concentrating on ethnography, chapter 4 on geography, and chapter 5 on the edges of the world.

The core of Murphy’s argument revolves around multiple parallels between Pliny and his imperial master and between the *Natural History*’s text and Rome’s empire. The author collects, orders, and displays knowledge in a way which invites analogies with the emperor’s power, in his capacity not simply as political ruler and controller of his empire, but also as arbiter and editor of knowledge of the natural world. The emperor could initiate the military expeditions which were a prime means of expanding and demarcating knowledge of nature; he could stage the public shows and triumphal processions

which showed off the natural spoils of the conquered lands; and he could authorize acceptance or verification of new information: delegations reporting or physically bringing natural novelties and rarities to the emperor are frequently mentioned in the ancient sources.

The contents of the *Natural History* are themselves products of imperial power, whose systematic organization, listing and display by Pliny in his text bears witness to and celebrates that power. Murphy also argues that, like many of the products of empire preserved in its pages, the knowledge contained in the *Natural History* is in itself a commodity, though in a metaphorical rather than commercial sense, conferring status and power on its holder. It should, so Murphy argues, be bestowed rather than bought, which leads him to suggest that Larcus Licinus, whose unsuccessful attempt to buy Pliny's notes is recorded by his nephew [*Letters* 3.5.17], was guilty of a breach of good taste. At all events, he succeeds in showing that the possession of intellectual goods was coveted as a status indicator. The episode as Murphy interprets it has some affinities with the later efforts of Elias Ashmole to gain control of and take credit for the Tradescant collection of curios, which eventually formed the basis of the Ashmolean Museum, named solely after himself [see, e.g., Swann 2001, 38–54].

This metaphorical commodification of knowledge acts as a vital counterbalance to the explosion of opportunities for material greed also offered by empire, which threatens to suffocate intellectual effort. Here, however, as Murphy admits, the tensions engendered work against any straightforward parallels between the ordering of empire and the ordering of Pliny's text. He suggests that the pressure put on knowledge is partially responsible for the discursiveness of the *Natural History*. While this discursiveness owes much to a cultural aesthetic which valued intricacy and variety and, through ancient philosophical discourse, the use of analogy, it was enhanced by Pliny's desire to gather and preserve the obscure and particular aspects of Roman tradition before they were submerged. In this respect, ironically, his structure appears 'contrary to the organizing *imperium* which made its writing possible' [73].

Murphy's treatment of the ethnographical descriptions in the *Natural History* follows trends in modern scholarship pioneered in the case of the classical world by Hartog's treatment [1988] of the

Scythians in the Greek historian Herodotus. Portrayals of individual races and customs scattered through the *Natural History* act as ‘windows’ onto Pliny’s own society [94]: the depiction of their strangeness is important for what it tells us about the Roman moral and social order from luxury to suicide, rather than for any notion of its ‘truth’. Chapter 4 turns to more general geographical portrayals and examines the strategies used in the *Natural History* to view the world in a possessive imperialist manner. This is further elaborated by analyzing Pliny’s review of the world and its contents in terms of the Roman triumphal procession which paraded, in addition to the human captives, animal, vegetable, and mineral spoils from the conquered territories, together with representations of captured cities and landscapes. The final chapter considers Pliny’s depiction of the limits of empire: his idiosyncratic and apparently unhistorical account of the wretched, uncivilized existence of the Germanic Chauci in a northern wasteland serves as an extended metaphor for the limits of the organized civilization of the Roman empire, coterminous with nature itself in both time and space.

Murphy presents a coherent picture of a fascinating but frequently overwhelming text. The reader is carried along by his clear, incisive style. Footnotes tend to be brief, which is generally no bad thing, although there are a few occasions when the reader would benefit from more indication of the background to some of his ideas and the scholarly tradition behind them. A text of this size and complexity can of course be ‘read’ in more than one way. Murphy, however, has done an excellent job in presenting his particular interpretation in a persuasive and highly illuminating manner. Those approaching the *Natural History* for the first time, and/or wishing to contextualize Pliny’s work in the history of science will find an engaging and approachable analysis. Those more familiar with it will appreciate the many fresh and thought-provoking insights Murphy has to offer.

In conjunction with some general conclusions, ideas which appeared earlier in the book, such as the parallel between author and emperor, are developed further in the final pages; others appear more or less for the first time, including a brief consideration of the *Natural History*’s legacy in the field of scientific thought. For Murphy, the work’s long-term significance in this respect lies in its ordered and systematic display of nature, which influenced later re-assemblies of nature according to the cultural priorities of successive eras. Thus,

18th-century imperial expansion ‘supplied natural objects to be refined into knowledge by the researches of the intellectual, who in turn converted the diversity of the world into an ordered text...’ [216]. At the beginning of this review, I noted one such re-assembly, that proposed by Bacon a century earlier. In advocating a revision of the ‘opinions of the ancients’, he, too, was responding, like Pliny, to the challenges of an expanding world:

Quin et caelum ipsum imitabile fecimus. Caeli enim est, circumire terram: quod et nostrae navigationes pervicerunt. Turpe autem nobis sit, si globi materiati tractus, terrarum vicelicet et marium, nostris temporibus in immensum aperti et illustrati sint: globi autem intellectualis fines, inter veterum inventa et angustias steterint. Neque parvo inter se nexu devincta et conjugata sunt ista duo, perlustratio regionum et scientiarum. Plurima enim per longinquas navigationes et peregrinationes in natura patuerunt, quae novam sapientiae et scientiae humanae lucem affundere possint, et antiquorum opiniones et conjecturas experimento regere. [Spedding, Ellis, and Heath 1857–1874, 3.584]

We have succeeded in imitating the heaven, whose property it is to encircle the earth; for this we have done by our voyages. It would disgrace us, now that the wide spaces of the material globe, the lands and seas, have been broached and explored, if the limits of the intellectual globe should be set by the narrow discoveries of the ancients. Nor are these enterprises, the opening up of the earth and the opening up of the sciences, linked and yoked together in any trivial way. Distant voyages and travels have brought to light many things in nature, which may throw fresh light on human philosophy and science and correct by experience the opinions and conjectures of the ancients. [Farrington 1964, 131]

Bacon was arguing that his era should break free of the suffocating embrace of Aristotelian natural science, utilizing its increasing knowledge and control of nature. In ‘imitating the heaven’ however, he unconsciously evoked a similar sentiment from an era whose ideas he was trying to escape. In *Natural History* 27.3, Pliny celebrated Rome’s imperial power and its ability to view and control the known

world as mirroring that of Nature, specifically through a comparison to Nature's ruling principle, the Sun.

Scythicam herbam a Maeotis paludibus, et euphorbiam e monte Atlante ultraque Herculis columnas ex ipso rerum naturae defectu, parte alia britannicam ex oceani insulis extra terras positis, itemque aethiopidem ab exusto sideribus axe, alias praeterea aliunde ultro citroque humanae saluti in toto orbe portari, immensa Romanae pacis maiestate non homines modo diversis inter se terris gentibusque verum etiam montes et excedentia in nubes iuga partusque eorum et herbas quoque invicem ostentante. aeternum quaeso deorum sit munus istud. adeo Romanos velut alteram lucem dedisse rebus humanis videntur. [Nat. Hist. 27.3]

The Scythian plant is brought from the marshes of Maeotis, euphorbia from Mount Atlas and from beyond the Pillars of Hercules where Nature actually peters out. In another quarter, brittanica comes from islands in the Outer Ocean beyond the main land mass, while aethiopsis comes from a region scorched by the stars. Other remedies besides are transported in every direction for the benefit of humanity, as the boundless grandeur of the Roman peace displays in turn not only the human race with its different lands and peoples, but also mountain peaks and lofty ranges soaring into the clouds, with their produce and their plants. I pray that this gift of the gods may last for ever! So truly do they seem to have given the Romans to humanity as a second sun. [See 131–133]

As noted earlier, Pliny was aware that the 'opening up' of new lands was not always as conducive to the 'sciences' as it was to material commerce and Murphy discusses several passages, notably 14.2–4, in this context [69–73]. However, it is probably 27.3 which comes closest to capturing the spirit of Pliny's text as an imperial enterprise, and justifying the rationale behind this stimulating interpretation of his *Natural History*.

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