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Scholars Off the Page

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Pliny's Encyclopedia
The Reception of the Natural
History

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Pliny's Encyclopedia: The Reception of the Natural History

Aude Doody

INTRODUCTION:

If Pliny the Elder is famous for anything, it is probably for going too close to a volcano. Not just any volcano, the celebrity of Vesuvius has lent a kind of glamour to the story of Pliny's death, as it was told by one famous writer to another, in a tantalising moment of literary exchange between Pliny the Younger and Tacitus (*Epistles* 6.16). For later readers, the mode of his death could make Pliny an icon of scientific endeavour: on his deathbed, Francis Bacon finds a precursor in Pliny, blaming dangerous experiments rather than too much opium for his final illness; for the radical encyclopedists of eighteenth-century Paris, Pliny's death made him a martyr for rational science in the face of ignorance and superstition. It is a romantic image, one that oddly coexists with the sometimes dismissive, sometimes indulgent, criticism that nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship lavished on his one surviving work. The *Historia Naturalis*, or *Natural History* as I will call it, is less often read than the letters of the more popular Pliny, but it continues to be used as an indispensable source by historians of the ancient world. There is little in the way of romance about the *Natural History*. Its catalogues of dry facts, studded with fantastic stories, build a monumental account of the nature of things, always threatening to flatten the reader under the weight of its knowledge. For this, and more complex reasons, it is usually called an encyclopedia.

But if the *Natural History* is an encyclopedia, it is not because its first readers could have recognised it as one, or, at least, not on our terms. Yet the idea that the *Natural History* is an encyclopedia has had, and continues to have, a diffuse influence on how we approach the text, and how we think of its author. Pliny's *Natural History* is often called the first western encyclopedia, but it is a strange thing to stand at the beginning of a tradition, especially one as elusive as encyclopedism. The generic recognition of the *Natural History* as an encyclopedia has profoundly affected the ways we read and use it, but the extent to which its long history of use continues to impact on scholarly approaches to the *Natural History* remains underanalysed. The *Natural History* is a formidably successful reference work: generations of scholars, right up until the sixteenth century, could turn to Pliny as an authoritative source for information on medicine and on nature. When his facts became less useful for practitioners, they became more interesting to antiquarians: Pliny continues to provide key information for Classicists on aspects of ancient knowledge from agriculture to zoology. In its long history of use, the *Natural History* had a role in shaping many disciplines, but this role has been discounted by most readers of Pliny, who come to the text with a set of specialist queries in mind. My aim here is to examine the history of reading Pliny's text as 'an encyclopedia'. From the subversive and revolutionary encyclopedist that Diderot found in the author of the *Natural History*, to the pedantic compiler of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the Roman imperialist of

recent work, perceptions of who Pliny was and what the *Natural History* stands for have changed in sympathy with prevailing ideas of what an encyclopedia is for. This book is a study in intellectual history with two distinct aims: the first is to illuminate how a Classical text is read differently in response to the demands of different eras of scholarship; the second is to change the terms on which Pliny is approached by readers today.

My more adversarial ambition of defamiliarising the image of Pliny prevalent among modern readers gives the impetus to my approach to the history of his text.

Let me begin, then, by sketching out some of the problems facing those of us who want to make sense of Pliny for the new century. The key issue is the continuing usefulness of Pliny's text. Over the years, a lot has been invested in the ability of Pliny to provide uncontroversial evidence for historians engaged in a wide range of explorations. Pliny has had a long career in the footnotes of major historical studies, lending his weight to the substructure of the argument; it is in footnotes that many battles on the accuracy of Pliny's information have been lost and won. The underlying question is one that Barbara Levick once posed in a footnote to her study on Roman colonies: 'but can Pliny be trusted?' The question of whether Pliny is a book or a person, to be trusted or mistrusted, is an open one. It was Pliny the Younger who put the character of Pliny on the agenda for later readers of his work, and as we will see, ideas of who Pliny is change alongside changing uses of his work. It is an unnerving moment, however, when we realise how many arguments over the years have been premised on the accuracy and objectivity of Pliny's work.

Objectivity is a difficult idea to defend these days. Most critics would now attest, with Foucault, that even aside from overt ideological agendas, all reference works occlude choices about what is left out and what is left in, how the information is arranged and presented, all of which impact on how the work can be read. There has been a resurgence of interest in ancient technical writing over the past ten years, driven partly by this new awareness of these texts' complexity. In the case of Pliny, new studies have reacted against the straightforward appropriation of Pliny's facts and the piecemeal reading of his work, by probing the text for a hidden unity or cohesive message. Mary Beagon and Andrew Wallace-Hadrill looked to Roman concepts of nature for the point of the text; Trevor Murphy, Sorcha Carey and Valérie Naas found it in an imperialist worldview that has Rome at its centre. If a gap has opened between scholars who use and scholars who read Pliny, it is one historians would like to close as quickly as possible. We still need to use Pliny: he is our best, sometimes our only, written source for aspects of Roman technology and Greek art, for instance. Finding the limits of a fact's debt to Pliny's wider concerns is not easy, however, especially if we then want to use the fact to construct our own stories about Roman medicine, or Roman economics or whatever.

In one respect, the gap between reading Pliny and using his information is not a large one, in that both practices tend to share a general perception of the *Natural History* as an unoriginal, and largely self-evident compilation. Even when Pliny's rhetoric is unpacked, the result is usually an image of the 'old Roman moralist', reassuringly conservative in social and intellectual matters. Jacqueline Vons' work on the image of women in the

Natural History struggled to reconcile what she saw as Pliny's idiosyncrasy and a sense that the *Natural History* was a reflection of a common cultural system. More dynamically, Mary Beagon and Gian Biagio Conte place Pliny's 'typicalness' at the heart of what they think is important about him: his ability to provide us with an idea of the average interests and competence of a Roman man in the first century. Whether consciously or unconsciously, these ideas about Pliny's ordinariness are informed by assumptions of what it means to write an encyclopedia. An encyclopedia is rarely imagined to have literary ambitions, often seen instead as a repository of the general knowledge or common culture of the era in which it first emerged. In the case of the *Natural History*, the idea that its encyclopedism might represent 'an epitome of first-century culture' or 'an encyclopedia of all contemporary knowledge' is an enticing prospect for modern Classicists, offering a glimpse of shared cultural horizons between writer and reader in the first century. But equating what Pliny gives us in the *Natural History* with general cultural knowledge is a perversely difficult claim to keep up, without the bulwark of a particular vision of encyclopedism to support it.

I intend to open up the more alarming possibility of a radical Pliny, writing a peculiar and innovative natural history that is profoundly and thoughtfully unlike other scholarship that survives from antiquity. As I will suggest, the *Natural History* represents an odd idea of what one should know about nature – and how one should know it – in the context of Roman writing. Reading it through the lens of a later genre of encyclopedia has too easily naturalised the strangeness of Pliny's text. ...

The usefulness of the *Natural History* has largely obscured its entertainment value, and the quirkiness of the world that Pliny offers us. Hopefully this interrogation of what it means to read an encyclopedia will open a new space for discovering meanings in the text, new questions we want to ask of it.