

M. BEAGON, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal, Natural History Book 7*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 537 pp., ISBN13: 9780198150657, ISBN10: 0198150652.

Mary Beagon, with her influential book on Pliny the Elder which appeared in the early 1990s¹, inaugurated a season of reinvigorated interest in this Roman author, and such interest was subsequently confirmed by other scholars². In her latest effort, B. focuses on *HN 7*, a book which, in the context of both the *Naturalis Historia*, and of ancient literature in its entirety, stands out as a precious surviving testimony of Roman culture. Indeed, *HN 7* is the account, description, research –in short the *historia*– of the entry to which in Pliny’s encyclopaedia “the first place will rightly be assigned” (‘principium iure tribuetur homini’, *HN 7.1*), i.e. “the human animal”. *HN 7* is usually regarded as an account of Roman anthropology, and it also contains occasional ethnographic descriptions not covered in the geographic books 3 through 6 of the *Naturalis Historia*. As B. notes in the Preface (xi), its value probably lies primarily in the fact that it is a natural history of humanity, which reveals the cultural belief of the first century AD with a detail and a variety unmatched by any other ancient record.

B.’s book is divided into 3 main sections: Introduction (1-57), Translation (59-106), and Commentary (107-472). It also contains

¹ M. Beagon, *Roman Nature: the thought of Pliny the Elder*, Oxford 1992.

² R. French, *Ancient natural history: histories of nature*, London 1994, 196-255; J.F. Healy, *Pliny the Elder on science and technology*, Oxford 1999; R. C. A. Rottländer, *Plinius Secundus d. Ä.*, St. Katharinen 2000; V. Naas, *Le projet encyclopédique de Pline l’Ancien*, Rome 2002; S. Carey, *Pliny’s catalogue of culture: art and empire in the Natural History*, Oxford 2003; T. Murphy, *Pliny the Elder’s Natural History: the empire in the encyclopedia*, Oxford 2004.

a rich bibliography, a “Chronology of Pliny’s Life and Times”, and a useful list of “Weights and Measures in the *HN*”.

The Introduction starts with an account of Pliny’s biography in the framework of the political context and the cultural background of his day. B. tells us how the advent of the Flavian dynasty witnessed the revival of the ancient *mos maiorum*, i.e. the appeal to the ancestral *exempla* of Roman moral tradition. This revival was not a mere nostalgic looking back into the Old, but a recovery of pristine Roman virtues (such as those propounded, e.g., in remote times by the Elder Cato, and more recently by Cicero) which were critically analysed and adjusted in light of both the new political *milieu* established by Augustus with the *Pax Romana* (still surviving, despite the parenthesis of Nero’s principate), and the much larger territorial horizons embraced by Roman domination. B. emphasizes that such a historical context deeply influenced the subject matter of the *Naturalis Historia* and its encyclopaedic scope. For instance, a number of *historiae*, *res et observationes* therein contained derive from the *commentarii* compiled and brought home by Roman commanders and other military or civil servants stationed in the various locations of the Empire. The information gathered (especially *mirabilia*) was particularly welcome to the *curiositas* of the Romans of the first century AD. Symbolically, such information was an appropriate element to include in reports to the Emperor. It invested the latter not only with the power of possessing the conquered territory, but also of acquiring the knowledge of its contents, customs and history. In this vein, it is not accidental that Pliny chooses Titus (a member of the “duo of imperatores”, 7) and not Vespasian as the dedicatee of the *Naturalis Historia*. B. acutely notes that are several reasons for this choice. Firstly, the “shared military service had undoubtedly created a genuine friendship” (9) between Pliny and Titus. Secondly, to Pliny’s eye Titus had the qualities of both the true statesman and the learned person, i.e. he was ideally suited to rule the material possession of the Empire and to understand its culture. Thirdly, Pliny may have felt “that Rome was on the verge of encompassing within her power the entire world and that with this would come the ability to encompass the totality of nature, intellectually as well as militarily and politically (18)”: thus, in

view of the imminent taking up of exclusive power, it is –again– Titus who qualifies to handle and complete such a process.

Apropos the classification of the *Naturalis Historia*, B. states: “to the deceptively simple question, ‘what is the *HN*?’ there is no simple answer.” (20). For one thing, it is a treatise on *Natura*, i.e. a subject at once so general and so complex that it escapes any definite, unambiguous classification. More importantly, besides the literary, historical, philosophical, scientific and artistic aspects, Pliny’s narration is deeply influenced and justified by the aforementioned ideological, if not propagandistic, implications which are absent in any other encyclopaedic work from Classical Antiquity. As a result, he must face the heavy task of meeting his intellectual aspirations without neglecting the “political” motivations.

The task of cataloguing all the items distributed over so vast a territory as that encompassed by the Roman Empire had to be accomplished by a suitable methodological approach. Beside the cultural tradition offered by a few Roman *auctores* (some of whom, like Varro, were highly influential for him) Pliny has to resort mostly to Greek culture. Despite his ambiguity towards the Greeks (10), such a choice was inescapable (12). This reviewer cannot resist the obvious temptation to imagine that, in turning to Greek authorities, Pliny must have often recalled to himself the bitter lines of the Poet: “Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artis intulit agresti Latio” (Hor. *epist.* 2.156–7). Indeed, among the *artes* referred to by Horace, the “liberal” disciplines would amply serve Pliny’s project: “ante omnia attingenda quae Graeci τῆς ἐγκυκλίου παιδείας vocant” (*HN* praef. 14), as B. notes (14)³. Pliny’s debt to Greek culture is as large in the department of philosophy, e.g. Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. The latter school makes a most important contribution to the *Naturalis Historia*, not only on account of the generalized revival of Hellenistic

³ Sen. *Ep* 88; see also I.G. Kidd, “Philosophy and science in Posidonius,” *A&A* 24, 1978, 7–15. In the late fourth century AD the definitions and tasks of the *liberales disciplinae* are also available in: Augustine, *Ord.* 2.12.35–15.43.

culture in the Rome of the first century AD⁴, but also because the Stoic emphasis, as B. notes on p. 15, “on ethical ideals such as independence of mind and devotion to duty combined with an ascetic lifestyle, had coincided with the specifically Roman code of conduct embodied in *mos maiorum*.” The debt the *Naturalis Historia* owes to Greek authorities is indeed substantial, and Book 7 is no exception: Pliny derives the compilation of its 747 *historiae, res et observationes* from as many as 50 *externi auctores*, a number which is more than twice that of Roman *auctores* (24). Pliny can nonetheless pride himself on having brought about an enterprise which, in terms of both structure and contents, has no precedent, especially not in the illustrious Greek cultural tradition: “nemo apud nos qui idem temptaverit invenitur, nemo apud Graecos qui unus omnia ea tractaverit” (*HN* praef. 14). B. notes (20-1) that previous Roman authors (*apud nos*), such as Varro and Celsus, “had divided knowledge up into neat compartments or subject divisions according to the artes...divisions that were to develop into the *trivium* and *quadrivium* of the medieval liberal arts.” (A further, notable example in the fourth century AD is also available in Martianus Capella’s *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*.) Also “despite the evident debt to Aristotle” (a pre-eminent authority *apud Graecos*) “the *HN* owes little to the analytical approach to nature and its parts of the Aristotelian school. If classification was a main goal of Aristotle’s study of nature, for Pliny it provides nothing more than a convenient backdrop for a very different enterprise.” Pliny’s enterprise is unique in that *Natura* is not just a scientific entity, but the all-compassing horizon of human life and its interaction with nature itself (21). Also, in the *Naturalis Historia* nature meets culture and is indistinguishable from it, and the literary result is an all-inclusive practical (in terms of both Roman tradition and Stoic doctrine), encyclopaedic guide to

⁴ A.A. Long, “Roman Philosophy”, *Greek and Roman Philosophy*, Cambridge 2003, 184-210; C. Gill, “The School in the Roman imperial period”, *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, Cambridge 2003, 33-56; B. Inwood, “Review of The Roman Stoics: self-responsibility, and affections, by G. Reydam-Schils,” *CPh* 101, 2006, 88-93.

life. Through an acute parallel with the historical/archaeological evidence of the (materially conquered) spoils housed in Augustus' temple of Mars (23), B. interestingly notes that the *Naturalis Historia* is the house of the (culturally appraised) *mirabilia* concerning the same peoples and territories conquered by imperial Rome. Nature, however, is much more than just *mirabilia*, and B. tells us that in his programmatic agenda Pliny set before him the task of describing nature in its Unity and Totality, as well as in its Variety and Versatility. If by themselves they do not answer the question 'what is the *Naturalis Historia*?', these four aspects highlight the methodological pattern with which Pliny brought about his design to describe nature as a "whole" and as a combination of "parts", and however innumerable the latter may be, he can pride himself on having neglected none: "Salve, parens rerum omnium Natura, teque nobis Quiritium solis celebratam esse numeris omnibus tuis fave" *HN* 37.205. However, B. suggests, by the term "numeris" Pliny meant not only the individuals and peoples, the animal and vegetal species, the seas and lands, etc. which made up the *Natura* of his day, but also their respective histories and transformations since time immemorial. In other words, the *Naturalis Historia* involves both spatial and temporal perspectives, and its definition as the "inventory of the world" (suggested by Conte)⁵ does not concern the "current" items alone. As a consequence, its dedicatee Titus is both the ruler of a territorial domination and the custodian of a historical heritage.

Although it is generally acknowledged that *HN* 7 is largely a self-contained book, its content is better appreciated when it is read in the context of the whole of the *Naturalis Historia*. This is probably the reason why B. devotes a considerable part of the Introduction (1-38) to illustrating and analysing the general outline of the latter. Indeed, the comparatively long description of the general features of the *Naturalis Historia* helps the reader to approach the (largely unexpected) material narrated in *HN* 7. B. warns the readers that they will be disappointed, should they

⁵ G.B. Conte, "Inventario del mondo", introductory essay to: *Gaio Plinio Secondo, Storia Naturale*, Turin 1982, I, xvii-xlvii.

expect to find therein any information on “Mr & Mrs Average” of Pliny’s day (41). While Pliny is amply indebted to Aristotle’s treatises on animals, he reports no systematic treatments of physiology, embryology, human growth and development. His main interest is in the unexpected, such as monstrous or unusual births (*HN* 7.33-52). On the other hand, B. recalls that it is just through these *mirabilia* that Pliny highlights the connection between man and the other animals, and his unique role in nature. The narration of *HN* 7 involves in the highest degree the occurrence of Variety, Universality and Versatility, which inform the aforementioned whole/parts dichotomy underpinning the general structure and narration of the *Naturalis Historia*. In particular, B. finds that “Variety seems to lie at the heart of Pliny’s discussion of man in book 7” (43). On the other hand, the human species possesses a Universality of local distribution which is not possible for any animal race. Moreover, “man alone can reproduce and give birth at any time of the year” (44). Again, as in the whole of the *Naturalis Historia*, in book 7 we find that the “Universality” issue applies to man both spatially and temporally. As a consequence, it is also thanks to this exclusive prerogative that to him “the first place will rightly be assigned,” *HN* 7.1. But, just what it is that makes the human animal so unique and special? Man’s distinctive *natura* seems to derive from Pliny’s (largely Stoic) view that “man possesses unique powers of rational thought and with it a capacity for moral deliberation” (45). Indeed, the Stoics held that⁶, although god is superior to man, the former is on very close terms with the latter, as they both share (κοινωνία) reason (λόγου) which is the “norm” (νόμος) possessed by nature, and for a Stoic, such a νόμος is the primary basis for moral deliberation⁷.

B. then goes on to treat other “themes and approaches” of *HN* 7, which involve “separation and affinity” between man and the

⁶ H. von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, 3 Voll., Stuttgart, 1964: SVF II.528.

⁷ A.A. Long, “The Logical Basis of Stoic Ethics”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1970-71, 85-104.

rest of animals. In particular, she emphasizes the fact that “the material in book 7 is concerned with what makes man human rather than what makes him an animal” (49). The uniqueness of man is further discussed and highlighted in the rich series of anecdotes in which Pliny lists and praises the military, political, intellectual and moral achievements accomplished by illustrious Roman personages: and by these exempla, B. notes, he implies that human excellence is, mainly and foremost, Roman excellence (51-2). A crucial paragraph of the Introduction is devoted to the “Human Paradox”, a phrase with which B. acutely defines a general theme underpinning, more or less implicitly, the narration of the whole of *HN* 7. Indeed, although man is inferior only to god, with whom he shares reason, and while all other animals and the rest exist for his exclusive sake, for Pliny he is also the frailest of all animals in several respects. For one thing, the first 6 paragraphs of *HN* 7 list a number of the unique weaknesses which strike man from birth, e.g. his lack of protection against a hostile environment. Besides, man is able to “do nothing unless he is taught, neither speaking, nor walking nor eating. In short, he can do nothing by natural instinct except weep!” (Transl. p. 59). Human vulnerability is so high that man is prone to dangers even before he sees the light, as in *HN* 7.43, where Pliny decries that “the very smell from lamps being put out is often enough to cause abortion” (Transl. p. 68). Also, the delicate human memory can be damaged by minor accidents, whereas in old age some vital parts of man die off in advance of the whole being, p. 52. In view of such vulnerability, Pliny is undecided as to whether nature “is more of a kind parent or a harsh stepmother (*noverca*) to man” (Transl. p. 59). Pliny analyzes the human paradox both generally as well as by reporting specific examples from famous individuals, such as Pompey (54-5).

The ending section of the Introduction is devoted to the “Catalogue of Inventors” occurring at *HN* 7.190-209. At first sight, B. notes, “this list appears to have been added by way of afterthought, after Pliny had concluded the final chapter in the natural history of man”. Indeed, it looks to be somewhat misplaced within the context of book 7, and such is the virtually unanimous judgment among commentators, e.g. “Il libro sembrerebbe concluso, ma Plinio presenta un’ultima sorpresa ai

lettori, fornendo un lungo e spesso assurdo elenco di invenzioni e di inventori⁸.” B. notes that such a list of inventions and inventors is not, after all, unreasonable since it is “very much in keeping with the tone of the *HN* as a whole, in which so much of the natural world is described in relation to man’s use and exploitation of it” (56). Moreover, B. adds, “the catalogue form itself, with its hasty, truncated references to dozens of inventors and inventions, mirrors the catalogue of divers human oddities invented by nature”, and it “encapsulates on a small scale the macrocosmic sweep of the *HN* in its totality as a human history of the natural world.”

The Translation is clear and pleasant to read. B. has accomplished the difficult task of giving the reader (particularly the reader lacking a professional command of Latin) a full and faithful knowledge of Pliny’s text, especially the numerous lengthy sections of it involving the narration of oddities, monstrosities, etc. I also think that this translation is a fully justified addition, if not an alternative, to Rackham’s translation, now over sixty years old⁹, and I feel that it will be equally welcomed by readers speaking native English or otherwise.

The Commentary is a hugely impressive witness to B’s achievement in providing readers with all they need to better interpret the message which Pliny left in *HN* 7. Indeed this Commentary is an unprecedented collection of references involving both the ancient sources as well as modern scholarly studies. B gives an insightful and detailed account of literary, historical, philosophical and even archaeological evidence which helps us to critically approach and understand the full import of Pliny’s narration. In particular, B. takes on the courageous and hard task of interpreting, among others, the puzzling accounts of oddities, prodigies and monstrosities which often occur in *HN* 7. These accounts have their roots in antiquity, going back to the 5th century BC Greek tradition of mingling together mythological,

⁸ G. Ranucci (ed. & transl.) *Gaio Plinio Secondo, Storia Naturale*, Turin, 1983, II, 4.

⁹ H. Rackham (ed & transl.), *Pliny Natural History*, Vol. II, London, 1947.

philosophical, historical and folkloristic elements; many of them have been side-stepped by previous commentators. The only reserve I have about B's book as a whole concerns the lack of a short, but informative, summary (perhaps in the Introduction or just before the Translation) giving an outline of the various themes treated by Pliny. I think that such a summary would have usefully introduced the reader into the inherently complex and heterogeneous structure of *HN* 7.

In conclusion, Mary Beagon's *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal* is a seminal book, because it greatly advances our understanding of Pliny's work. I feel that it will be equally useful to students (both at the undergraduate and graduate levels), to scholars and to anyone else interested in the historical, philological, and philosophical aspects of Roman culture. If this reviewer is granted the right to express an afterthought of his own, it might well have been an excess of modesty which caused Pliny to omit his own name in *HN* 7.190-209 as the inventor of the first, true *Encyclopaedia* of the natural world. In all probability, however, he entertained the much more important aspiration that one day some scholar would revive his fame, and would approach his work with as much insight, learning, passion and dedication as we find today in Mary Beagon's splendid book.

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