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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

Abstract

Review of *Pliny's Encyclopedia: The Reception of the Natural History* by Aude Doody.

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**Aude Doody, *Pliny's Encyclopedia: The Reception of the Natural History*.
Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. viii,
194. ISBN 9780521491037. \$95.00.**

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“We still need to use Pliny,” observes Aude Doody (p. 3) in this study of how the reception of Pliny’s *Natural History* has influenced modern conceptions of the work; Doody aims to make us better users.

Her book, which partakes of the recent burst of interest in the literary strategies of ancient technical writing, pursues one strand of the reception of the *Natural History*, namely, “the history of reading Pliny’s work as ‘an encyclopedia’” (p. 2). Such readings, which treat the work as “a repository of the general knowledge or common culture of the era in which it first emerged” (p. 4), view the *Natural History* as an instantiation of a genre that, Doody argues, did not exist in Pliny’s day. Understandings of and reactions to encyclopedic projects so defined have played a huge role, she shows, in the way users have understood and reacted to Pliny. To help the modern reader resist these interpretative consequences she aims to defamiliarize Pliny by setting his work instead “in the spectrum of ancient *historia*” (p. 174) and by trying to recapture “Pliny’s literary ambitions” (p. 132). The latter phrase, in particular, suggests just how innovative Doody’s project is: it takes a daring scholar to put the elder Pliny’s literary ambitions into the foreground of any investigation of his work when negative assessments of his literary success are so easy to find and so trenchantly expressed.

Pliny's Encyclopedia provides a good overview of the *Natural History*’s form and content: chapter 1 focuses on the work’s basic organizational structure, the list, chapter 2 on the geographies of Books 3-6, chapter 3 on the *summarium* of Book 1, and chapter 4 on Pliny’s contributions to medicine and art history. In the Introduction, “How to read an encyclopedia,” Doody engages with the principal approaches to Pliny’s text taken in recent years, with a wide variety of theoretical discussions of the encyclopedic genre, and with attempts to shape the field of “reception studies” for Greco-Roman antiquity. Her own study of the *Natural History*’s reception concentrates on works of the early modern and more recent periods; the medieval period and the work’s manuscript tradition are largely neglected.

Chapter 1, “Science and encyclopedism: The originality of the *Natural History*,” explores a striking paradox: “although the *Natural History* is quite unlike anything else that survives from antiquity, its author is a byword for pedantic unoriginality” (p. 13). The originality that Doody herself sees in the work is grounded in the “basic structures of

Pliny's text, (...) the lists of names that make up his narrative" (p. 14); Pliny's science may be second-hand but the framework in which he presents it is his own (for better or worse). The discussion challenges Conte's genre-based analysis of the *Natural History* as a "culture text" and the limitations that this form, in his view, placed on authorial autonomy. It also interrogates the prejudicial modern dichotomy between original science and derivative encyclopedism, which puts Pliny on the wrong side of the intellectual tracks. In Doody's view, the *Natural History* represents an entertaining and aesthetically ambitious working out of Pliny's novel view of nature as "the sum of its parts" (p. 23) rather than as the manifestation of a theory about the nature of the universe. The chapter concludes with a look at Francis Bacon's critique of the *Natural History*, a reading that contributed importantly to "ousting Pliny from his place in the scientific pantheon" (p. 31).

Chapter 2, "Diderot's Pliny and the politics of the encyclopedia," opens with a useful investigation of the phrase *enkyklios paideia*, concluding that the label is part of a rhetorical framework that authors, including Pliny (*pr.* 14), use in asserting the value of their work, and that it cannot be used to link Pliny's work in any meaningful way with other ancient works often called "encyclopedic" such as Cato's *Ad Filium*, Varro's *Disciplinae*, and Celsus' *Artes*. The second section focuses on the politics of Pliny's lists, particularly the lists of place names in Books 3-6, where he "maps the current status quo onto the landscape, and asserts that this status quo is what constitutes the nature of things, the way the world is" (p. 67). A distinction is drawn between the books on Europe, which are full of largely dishistoricized lists of places, and the more discursive Books 5 and 6 on Africa and Asia, which frequently have recourse to conquerors' accounts. Doody is nicely self-conscious about the fact that her reading here is a fairly predictable post-colonial product, and offers as a supplement and challenge to it the very different reading articulated by the Enlightenment *philosophe* Diderot, who hears in Pliny not the voice of Roman imperialism but that of a fellow *philosophe* and an accomplished Latin stylist to boot.

Chapter 3, "Finding facts: The *summarium* in the early printed editions," looks at the interpretative consequences of the presence of aids for the reader in the *Natural History*. The existence of an authorial *summarium*, Doody argues, has been taken as "an implicit claim that this is a reference work, to be read in segments" (p. 9). She discusses different presentations of the *summarium* and the chapter headings derived from it in incunable and modern printings of the text, basing her analysis on Pliny's own observation apropos of the *summarium* ("everyone will look for the particular thing they want and know where to find it," *pr.* 33) and asking how readers of various editions would answer three questions: "How is iron produced? Who was Praxiteles? What is a good cure for headache?" (p. 112). Over time, she shows, the *summarium* has been naturalized as a kind of table of contents, and editors have taken advantage of that conceptual category to depart significantly from the manuscript evidence (admittedly problematic) for the text, location, and form of the *summarium*, which lacks "the authority of literary narrative to demand that it be copied exactly as its author intended" (p. 99). After pursuing her three questions through the *Natural History* in its various formats she concludes that "the premise of the text is still that the reader has read the preceding books" (p. 124). That is, that the text's verdict on the question of whether the work is to be read or used is, despite Pliny's perhaps disingenuous opening remarks, distinctly on the side of reading. One particularly nice observation arising from Doody's sensitivity to the organization of Pliny's information concerns Pliny's much-maligned *mirabilia*, which often cluster at the end of a topic's discussion and which she sees as "the final word, the key to the

fascination of what went before” (p. 129).

Chapter 4, “Specialist readings: Art and medicine from the *Natural History*,” investigates an influential method of circumventing Pliny’s intentions for his material, the publication of collections of subject-specific excerpts, and asks what we lose “by reading the *Natural History* as the sum of its specialisms?” (p. 132). The first compilations examined are late antique excerpts from the *Natural History* and other works that circulated under the titles *Medicina Plinii* (4th century) and *Physica Plinii* (6th century), with particular attention given to Alban Thorer’s 1528 edition of the *Medicina Plinii*. The second is Eugénie Sellers’ influential 19th-century compilation, *The elder Pliny’s chapters on the history of art*. The latter collection in particular treats Pliny’s text in accordance with the then prevailing understanding of the *Natural History* as itself the product of a compiler who dismantled texts for his own uses. The chapter ends with an attempt to show what is gained by reintegrating art history chapters into the text and yields a restatement of the view of Pliny presented throughout this book, that of “an active author, moulding information to the demands of his text” (p. 172).

“Pliny has had a long career in the footnotes of major historical studies,” Doody notes in her introduction (p. 2); the Pliny who emerges from this book cannot be used so high-handedly. The *Natural History*’s information, like evidence from any other literary work, needs to be handled with appropriate sensitivity to the text’s structure and style. The book’s argument is in essence a negative one: it shows in a persuasive series of case studies how earlier readers and editors have short-changed the text. What will result if we begin to view the *Natural History*, as Doody urges us to do, “in the spectrum of ancient *historia*” (p. 174) rather than as a compilation or an encyclopedia remains to be seen.^{[1](#)}

Notes:

[1.](#) The only typos worth mentioning are the substitution of 200 for 2000 in the translation of *HN pr.* 17 on p. 19 (repeated on p. 156) and the corruption of the title of Oribasius’ *De victus ratione*, which appears as *De victu ratione* on p. 147.

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