

BELLARIA XLI



Pliny the Elder, Sta Maria Maggiore, Como

PLINY THE ELDER 2

The world, nature and gods: a general theory

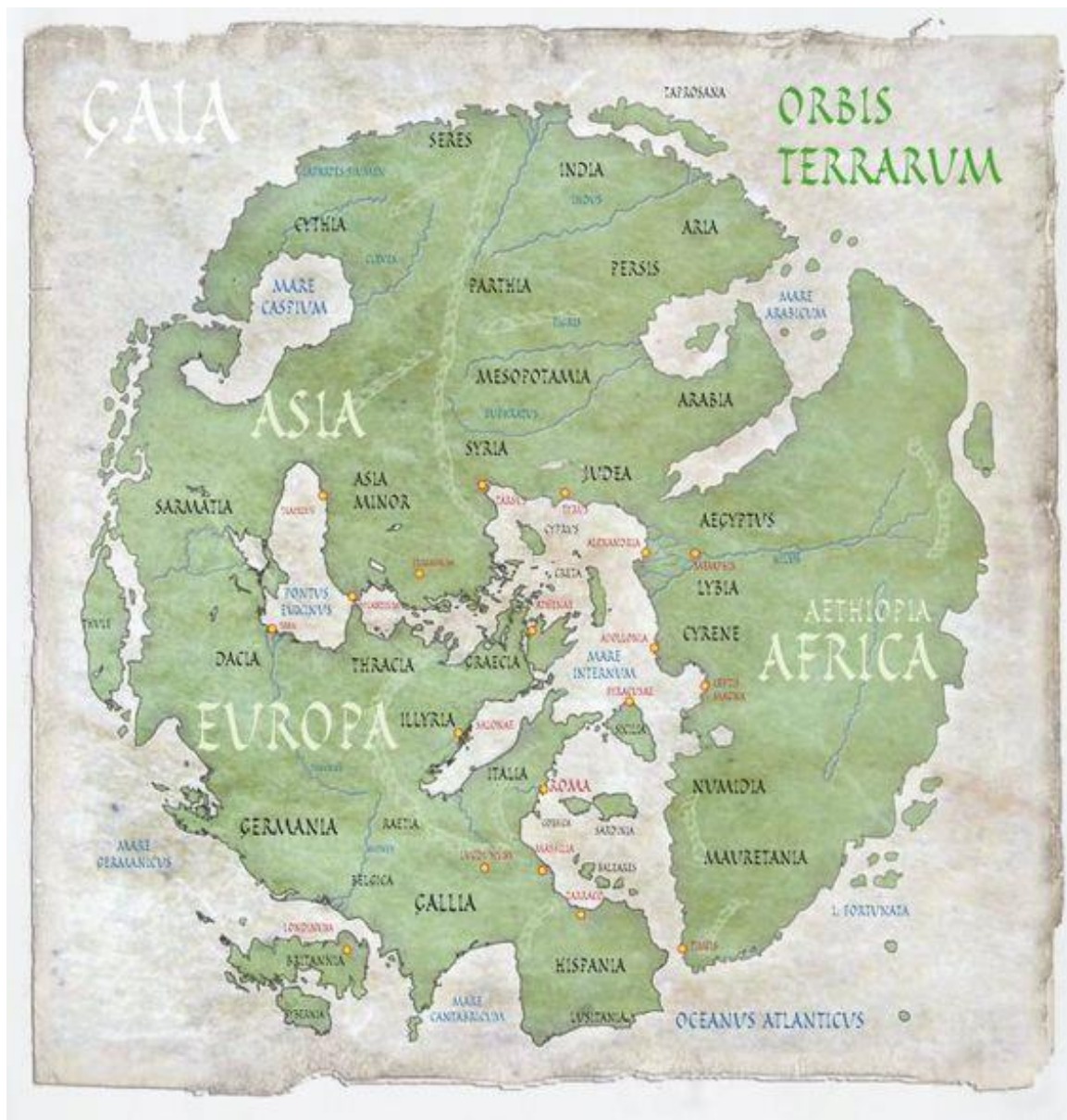
One world or many? 2.1-4

Pliny accepts the Stoic view that the world is 'divine' but he associates that divinity closely with a vaguely pantheistic Nature, which seems to be some sort of innate force that makes things what they are. However, he argues that it is madness to speculate on any matters beyond this world. If a man does not even know himself, what is he doing trying to fathom other worlds? That way, he implies, hubris lies, man over-reaching himself on a question he could never resolve.

1 The world—and whatever it is that we otherwise call the sky that encloses the universe in its vault—is reasonably believed to be a divine power, to be eternal, without bounds, neither created, nor subject, at any time, to destruction. To inquire what is beyond it is no concern of man, nor can any conjecture of the human mind grasp it. **2** It is sacred, eternal, and boundless, self-contained—indeed, rather complete in itself—infinite, yet like what is finite; the most certain of all things, yet like what is uncertain, embracing in itself all things without and within; it is the work of nature, and itself the very embodiment of nature.

1 *mundum—et hoc quodcumque nomine alio caelum appellare libuit, cuius circumflexu teguntur cuncta—numen esse credi par est, aeternum, immensum, neque genitum neque interiturum umquam. huius externa indagare nec interest hominum nec capit humanae coniectura mentis. 2* *sacer est, aeternus, immensus, totus in toto—immo uero ipse totum—infinitus ac finito similis, omnium rerum*

certus et similis incerto, extra intra cuncta complexus in se, idemque rerum naturae opus et rerum ipsa natura.



The Roman world

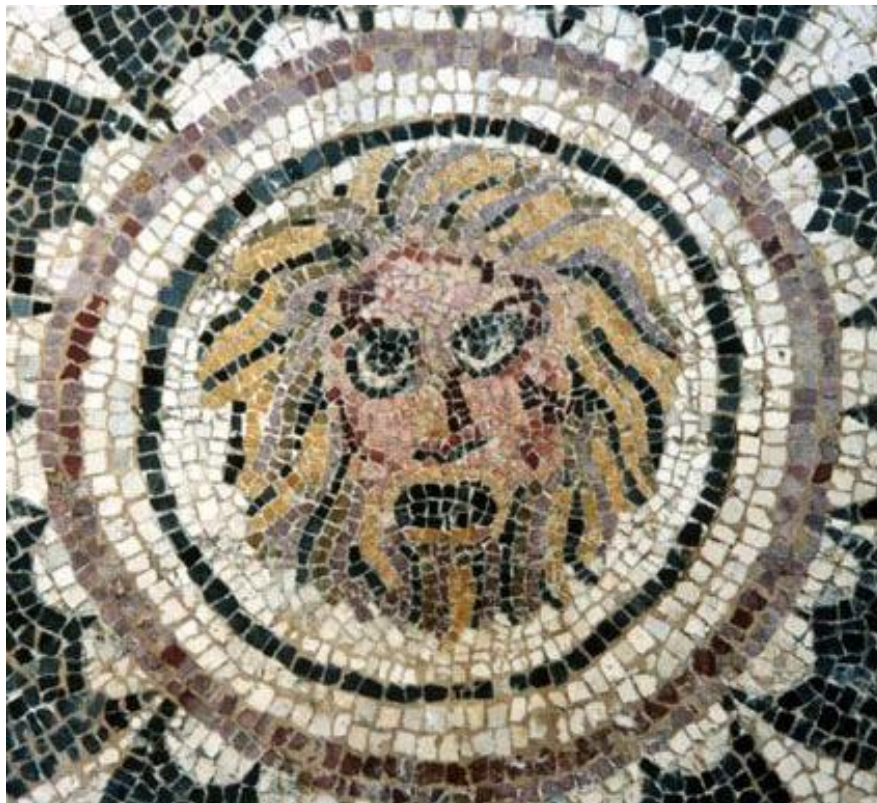
3 It is madness that certain men have worked on its measurement in their minds and dared to publish it; and that others—taking or being given the opportunity by the former—have taught that there are innumerable other worlds, so that we must believe there to be a similar number of systems, or that, if only one system produced all worlds, there will be the same number of suns and moons and other vast numbers of heavenly bodies as in a single world ... 4 It is madness, perfect madness, to go out of this world and, just as if everything within it were clearly known, to search for what is beyond it, as if a man who does not know himself could measure anything else, or as if the human mind could see what the world itself cannot contain.

3 *furor est mensuram eius animo quosdam agitasse atque prodere ausos, alios—rursus occasione hinc sumpta aut ab his data—innumerabiles tradidisse mundos, ut totidem rerum naturas credi oporteret aut, si una omnes incubaret, totidem tamen soles totidemque lunas et cetera etiam in uno et inmensa et innumerabilia sidera ... 4 furor est profecto, furor egredi ex eo et, tamquam interna eius cuncta plane iam nota sint, ita scrutari extera, quasi uero mensuram ullius rei possit agere qui sui nesciat, aut mens hominis possit uidere quae mundus ipse non capiat.*

The search for god, 2.14-21

Pliny makes it clear that if there is a god or a numen (a 'divine power'), there is little purpose in trying to determine its nature because it is far beyond our understanding. Man's efforts to do so are an insult because they lead to a completely irrational number of beliefs, e.g. that there are many gods, derived from human passions, hopes, desires and fears, or that gods behave as humans do, or look or behave bizarrely. He lights on the idea that a man who benefits other men is a god (or godlike?), citing this as a traditional way of rewarding such benefactors (here he references his patron Vespasian)—what sort of reward would that be if the gods were as depicted? Further, no god would want to deal with humans who worshipped him in so many different and revolting ways, seemingly designed to terrify humanity.

Here Pliny is reacting against foreign ideas he sees as corrupting traditional Roman beliefs and, more importantly, the dignity of rational man.



Graeco-Roman god of fear (4th C AD)

14 I consider it, therefore, an indication of human [intellectual and moral] decrepitude to inquire into the figure and form of god. For whatever god be, if there be a god, and wherever he exists, he is the complete embodiment of sense, sight, hearing, life, mind, and himself. To believe that there is a number of gods, and all derived from the virtues and vices of man, such as Chastity, Concord, Understanding, Hope, Honour, Clemency, and Fidelity; or, according to the opinion of Democritus, that there are only two (Punishment and Reward), indicates still greater folly. **15** Human nature, weak and frail as it is, has separated gods into groups, mindful of its own infirmity, so that everyone might worship those portions which he needed most of all. Hence we find different names employed by different nations, with divine powers of the lower world arranged in classes, and diseases and plagues also deified, in consequence of our anxious wish to propitiate them.

14 *quapropter effigiem dei formamque quaerere inbecillitatis humanae reor. quisquis est deus, si modo est aliquis, et quacumque in parte, totus est sensus, totus uisus, totus auditus, totus animae, totus animi, totus sui. innumeros quidem crederen atque etiam ex uitiis hominum, ut Pudicitiam, Concordiam, Mentem, Spem, Honorem, Clementiam, Fidem, aut, ut Democrito placuit, duos omnino (Poenam et Beneficium) maiorem ad socordiam accedit.* **15** *fragilis et laboriosa mortalitas in partes ita digessit, infirmitatis suae memor, ut portionibus coleret quisque quo maxime indigeret. itaque nomina alia aliis gentibus et numina in iisdem innumerabilia inuenimus, inferis quoque in genera discriptis morbisque et multis etiam pestibus, dum esse placatas trepido metu cupimus.*

16 It was for this reason that a temple was dedicated to Fever, at the public expense, on the Palatine Hill, and to Bereavement near the Temple of the Lares, and an altar to Bad Fortune on the Esquiline. On this account it is possible to understand that there is a greater population of the Celestials than of human beings, since individual men make as many separate gods for themselves, adopting their own Junos and his own Genii; and there are nations who make gods of certain animals, and even certain obscene things, which are not to be spoken of, swearing by stinking meats and such like. **17** To believe that marriages are contracted between the gods, and that, during so long a period, there should be no offspring, that some of them should be old and always grey-headed and others young and like children, some of a dark complexion, winged, lame, produced from eggs, living and dying on alternate days, is a mark of puerile fantasy; but it is beyond all effrontery to invent adultery taking place between them, that they have quarrels and hatreds, and that there are divine powers of theft and of various crimes.

16 *ideoque etiam publice Febris fanum in Palatio dicatum est, Orbonae ad aedem Larum, ara et Malae Fortunae Esquiliis. quam ob rem maior caelitem populus etiam quam hominum intellegi potest, cum singuli quoque ex semet ipsis totidem deos faciant lunones Geniosque adoptando sibi; gentes vero quaedam animalia et aliqua etiam obscena pro dis habeant, ac multa dictu magis pudenda, per fetidos cibos, alia et similia, iurantes.* **17** *matrimonia quidem inter deos credi, tantoque aevo ex iis neminem nasci, et alios esse grandaevos semper canosque, alios iuvenes atque pueros, atri coloris, aligeros, claudos, ovo editos, et alternis diebus viventes morientesque, puerilium prope deliramentorum est; sed super omnem inpudentiam, adulteria inter ipsos fingi, mox iurgia et odia, atque etiam furtorum esse et scelerum numina.*



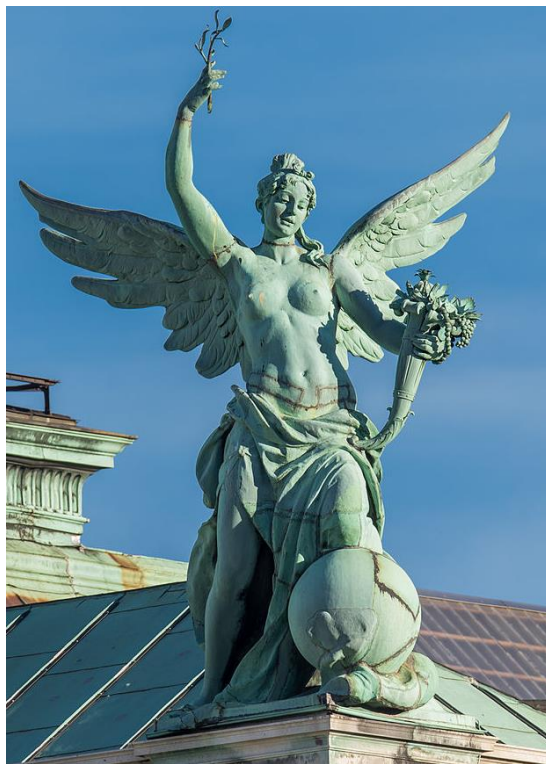
Centaurs fighting wild cats (Hadrian's villa)

18 For man to assist man is to be a god; this is the path to eternal glory. By this road went Roman leaders, and by this the road, with heavenly step, escorted by his children, goes the greatest ruler of our age, Vespasian Augustus, he who has come to the relief of an exhausted world. **19** This was the ancient mode of rewarding those who deserved it, to enlist them along the divine powers...

18 deus est mortali iuuare mortalem, et haec ad aeternam gloriam uia. hac proceres iere Romani, hac nunc caelesti passu cum liberis suis uadit maximus omnis aeuu rector Vespasianus Augustus fessis rebus subueniens. 19 hic est uetustissimus referendi bene merentibus gratiam mos, ut tales numinibus adscribant ...

20 But that the great head of all things, whatever it be, pays any regard to human affairs and that it is not polluted by such a disagreeable and complex responsibility—can we believe or doubt? It is hardly pertinent to judge what would be more profitable [sc. choices of forms of worship] for mankind, since some men have no respect for the gods at all, while others' worship is a cause of shame. **21** They are slaves to foreign ceremonies; they carry on their fingers [images of] their gods, and the monsters they worship they curse and devise foods for them; they impose on themselves tyrannical demands, not able even to sleep peacefully. They do not marry or adopt children, or indeed do anything else, without the sanction of sacrifices. There are others, on the contrary, who cheat in the very Capitol, and forswear themselves even by Jupiter Tonans ...

20 agere curam rerum humanarum illud, quicquid est, summum ac uel tam tristi atque multiplici ministerio non pollui credamus dubitemusne? uix prodest iudicare, utrum magis conducat generi humano, quando aliis nullus est deorum respectus, aliis pudendus. 21 externis famulantur sacris ac digitis deos gestant, monstra quoque colunt damnant, et excogitant cibos, imperia dira in ipsos, ne somno quidem quieto, inrogant. non matrimonia, non liberos, non denique quicquam aliud nisi iuuantibus sacris deligunt. alii in Capitolio fallunt ac fulminantem periurant louem ...



Goddess of Fortune (Johannes Benk, Vienna)

Fortune, 2.22-25

Finally, Pliny turns to the most common of all gods—the wholly irrational and unpredictable Fortuna—and an associated and increasingly popular fatalistic force astrology, the stars which pre-ordain everything, to add to oracles, soothsayers and so on. It is shocking that even intelligent people are falling for this. Such gods are nothing but an embarrassment to man's dignity, creating a level of uncertainty that makes animals seem blessed by contrast.

22 Between these discordant opinions mankind have discovered for themselves a kind of intermediate divine power, by which our scepticism concerning god is still increased. For all over the world in all places and at all times, with all voices Fortune is the only god invoked; she alone is spoken of, she alone is accused and she alone impeached; she alone is in our thoughts, is praised and blamed, and is loaded with reproaches; wavering as she is, conceived indeed by the generality of mankind to be blind, wayward, fickle, uncertain, variable, and often favouring the unworthy. **A** To her are debited all our losses and credited all our gains and, in casting up the accounts of mortals, she alone balances both sides of our ledger, and we are so much in the power of chance that, no questions asked, chance itself is considered as a god, as a result of which the existence of god becomes doubtful. **23** But there are others who reject this principle too and assign events to the influence of the stars, and to the laws of our birth; they suppose that affairs have been decreed by god, once for all, for all men that are ever to be, and that he grants himself a life of leisure thereafter. This opinion begins to gain ground, and both the learned and the unlearned masses are falling into it.

22 inuenit tamen inter has utrasque sententias medium sibi ipsa mortalitas numen, quo minus etiam plana de deo coniectatio esset. toto quippe mundo et omnibus locis omnibusque horis, omnium uocibus Fortuna sola inuocatur ac nominatur, una accusatur, res una agitur, una cogitatur, sola laudatur, sola arguitur et cum conuiciis colitur, uolubilis, a plerisque uero et caeca existimata, uaga, inconstans, incerta,

uaria indignorumque faulrix. A huic omnia expensa, huic feruntur accepta et, in toto ratione mortalium, sola utramque paginam facit, adeoque obnoxiae sumus sortis, ut prorsus ipsa pro deo sit qua deus probatur incertus. 23 pars alia et hanc pellit astroque suo euentus adsignat et nascendi legibus, semelque in omnes futuros umquam deo decretum, in reliquum uero otium datum. sedere coepit sententia haec, pariterque et eruditum uulgi et rude in eam cursus uadit.



Ancient soothsayers

24 And look, there are warnings from lightning, the warnings of oracles, the predictions of soothsayers, and things too trifling to be mentioned among omens, as sneezing and tripping over. The late Emperor Augustus relates that he put the left shoe on the wrong foot, the day when he was near being overthrown by a military coup. **25** And such things as these so embarrass improvident mortals, that among all of them this alone is certain, that there is nothing certain, and that there is nothing more proud or more wretched than man. **A** For other animals have no care but to provide for their subsistence, for which the spontaneous kindness of nature is all-sufficient—in this single aspect their life being preferable to all good things, that they never think about glory, or money, or ambition, and, above all, that they never reflect on death.

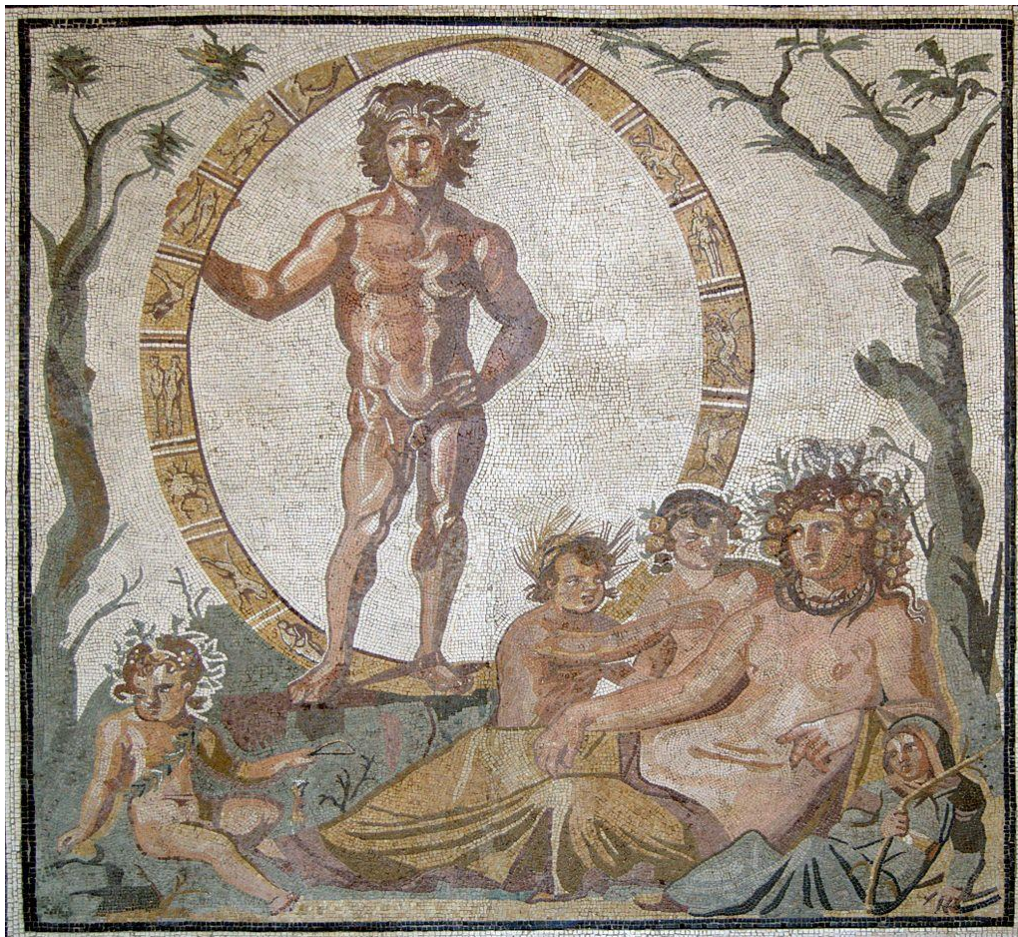
24 *ecce fulgurum monitus, oraculorum praescita, haruspicum praedicta atque etiam parua dictu in auguriis sternumenta et offensiones pedum. diuus Augustus prodidit laeuum sibi calceum praepostere inductum, quo die seditione militari prope adflictus est. 25* *quae singula inprouidam mortalitatem inuoluunt, solum ut inter ista uel certu sit nihil esse certi nec quicquam miserius homine aut superbius. A ceteris quippe animantium sola uictus cura est, in quo sponte naturae benignitas sufficit--uno quidem uel praeferendo cunctis bonis, quod de gloria, de pecunia, ambitione, superque de morte, non cogitant.*

God is Nature, 2.26-27

All of which things having been said, Pliny finally turns from the chaos of men's false beliefs to the notion of single deity, who really does care about humanity because man is closely related to god; and that god is the power of nature, in that there are some things even god cannot do. In other words, god does not act randomly in this world, any more than nature does.

26 But that, in these matters, the gods truly superintend human affairs is credible from life's experience, as well as that the punishment of crimes, sometimes late (with the Deity being occupied with such a mass of business) is never entirely abandoned, and that man was not made the next in rank to himself, that he should be one with brute beasts in worthlessness. **27** And indeed this constitutes the great comfort in this imperfect state of man, that even the Deity cannot do everything—for he cannot procure death for himself, even if he wished it, which is the best thing he granted to men, so numerous are the unpleasant consequences of life; nor can he make mortals immortal, or recall to life those who are dead; nor can he effect, that he who has once lived shall not have lived, or that he who has enjoyed honours shall not have enjoyed them—nor has he any power over past events, except of oblivion. **A** And (so that by a less serious argument the nature of our connexion with god may be linked), he cannot make twice ten not equal twenty, and many other things of this kind. By these considerations the power of Nature is clearly proved, and is shown to be what we call god.

26 uerum in his deos agere curam rerum humanarum credi ex usu uitae est, poenasque maleficiis, aliquando seras (occupato deo in toto mole), numquam autem inritas esse, nec ideo proximum illi genitum hominem, ut uilitate iuxta beluas esset. 27 imperfectae uero in homine naturae praecipua solatia, ne deum quidem posse omnia—namque nec sibi potest mortem consciscere, si uelit, quod homini dedit optimum in tantis uitae poenis; nec mortales aeternitate donare aut reuocare defunctos; nec facere ut qui uixit non uixerit, qui honores gessit non gesserit—nullumque habere in praeterita ius, praeterquam obliuionis. A atque (ut facietis ~ quoque ~ argumentis societas haec cum deo copuletur), ut bis dena uiginti non sunt, aut multa similiter efficere non posse. per quae declaratur haut dubie naturae potentia idque esse quod deum uocemus.



Roman god of Eternity, standing inside a celestial sphere decorated with zodiac signs, above the goddess Terra and (?) the four seasons. *Not* what Pliny had in mind ...

Although Pliny is rigorous about decrying the irrationality of men's view of the gods, he is not entirely consistent when it comes to referring to the divine in human life. Often, he talks rather loosely of 'gods', but this is no more than an inevitable *façon de parler* in a world which for most people was filled with them.

Next week: the physical world and Mother Earth