

BELLARIA XLII



Pliny the Elder, Sta Maria Maggiore, Como

PLINY THE ELDER 3

Regarding Earth as a divinity, Pliny both praises her abundant goodness and mildness to man and condemns man for the way he treats her. As for the world, he insists it is a globe, and attempts by logic and analogy to explain to the uneducated why we do not fall off it, and other tricky problems.

Mother Earth, 2.155-159

Pliny begins his introduction to the physical world by emphasising nature's providence and man's consequent moral responsibility to the Goddess, themes he maintains throughout the Natural History. But even so, from the moment we are born to the moment we die, when the Earth covers us and supports the monuments that celebrate us, we do not fully appreciate Her.



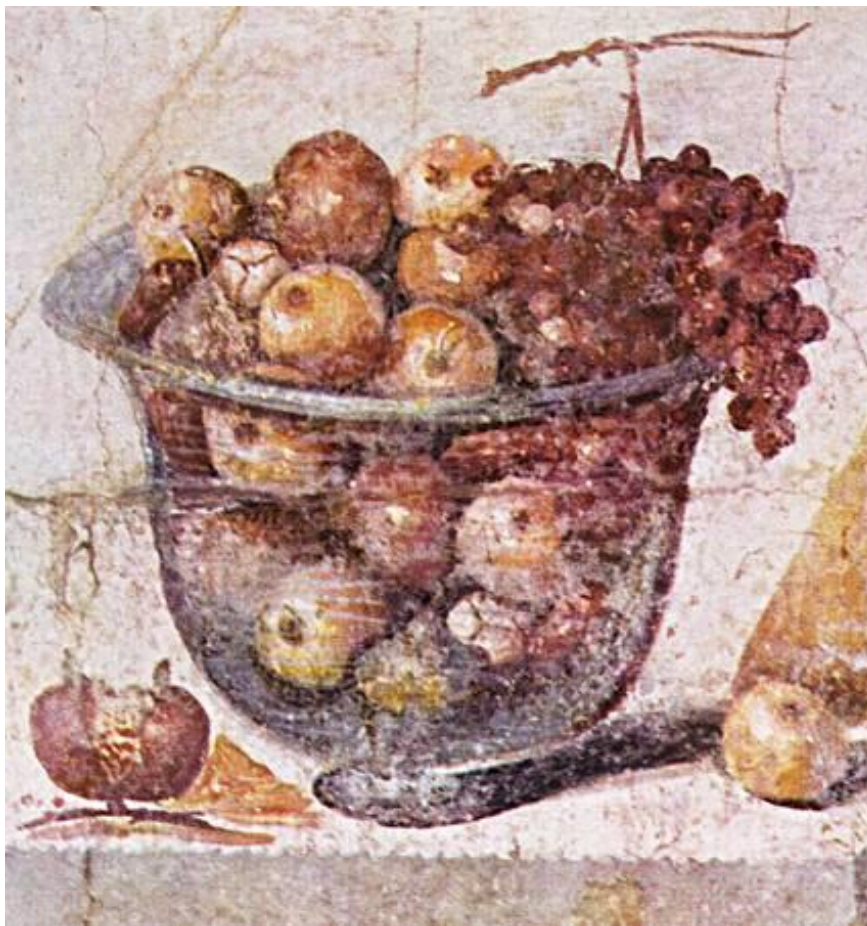
Piranesi's somewhat overheated imagination at work on the graves along the Via Appia

154 Next comes the Earth, on which alone of all parts of nature, because of Her outstanding worth, we have bestowed the venerable name of Mother. She, the province of man as the sky of god, Who receives us at our birth, nourishes us when born, and once brought forth always supports us and, lastly, embracing us in Her bosom when we are rejected by the rest of nature, She most of all shelters us as a mother; sacred to us by nothing other than a service by which She makes us sacred, carrying our monuments and epitaphs, prolonging our names, and extending our memory against the shortness of life. Her divinity is the last we angrily invoke to [lie] heavy on those who are no more, as if we were ignorant that She is the only element Who is never angry with man.

154 *sequitur terra, cui uni rerum naturae partium, eximia propter merita, cognomen indidimus maternae uenerationis. sic hominum illa, ut caelum dei, quae nos nascentes excipit, natos alit semelque editos sustinet semper; nouissime complexa gremio, iam a reliqua natura abdicatos, tum maxime ut mater operiens, nullo magis sacra merito quam quo nos quoque sacros facit, etiam monimenta ac titulos gerens nomenque prorogans nostrum et memoriam extendens contra breuitatem aeuī, cuius numen ultimum iam nullis precamur irati graue, tamquam nesciamus hanc esse solam quae numquam irascatur homini.*

Earth's gifts, 2.155

Earth produces so much so freely to man's advantage, but cannot be blamed for poisonous animals; indeed a snake who kills a man receives no further welcome from Her.



Fruits from a Pompeii fresco

155 While water turns into rain, freezes into hail, swells into waves, falls headlong in torrents, and the air is condensed into clouds, rages in storms—yet Earth, kind, mild, and indulgent as She is, and always ministering to the wants of mortals, how much She produces that we force Her to, how much She spontaneously pours out! What scents and savours, juices, tactile properties and colours! With what good faith does She pay back the interest on Her loans! What food She produces for our benefit! As for living things that are poisonous—their breath of life is to blame—Earth has no option but to receive their seeds and sustain them when they are born. The fault lies in the evil nature which generates them. Earth will no longer harbour a serpent after it has attacked any one, and thus She exacts retribution even in the name of those who are dead. She pours forth a profusion of medicinal plants, and is always producing something for the use of man.

155 *aquae subeunt in imbres, rigescunt in grandines, tumescunt in fluctus, praecipitantur in torrentes, aer densatur nubibus, furit procellis—at haec benigna, mitis, indulgens ususque mortalium semper ancilla, quae coacta generat, quae sponte fundit, quos odores sapesque, quos sucos, quos tactus, quos colores! quam bona fide creditum faenus reddit! quae nostra causa alit! pestifera enim animantia—uitali spiritu habente culpam—illi necesse est semina excipere et genita sustinere; sed in malis generantium noxa est. illa serpentem homine percusso amplius non recipit, poenasque etiam inertium nomine exigit. illa medicas fundit herbas et semper homini parturit.*



Earth takes pity on us, however badly we treat her, 2.156-9

156 Moreover, it is possible to suppose that, taking pity on us, She has ordained poisonous substances so that, when we are weary of life, starvation, a death most foreign to earth's good services, might not consume us by a slow decay, or so that precipices might not scatter our mangled bodies, or that the perverted punishment of the noose may not torture us—by stopping the breath of one who seeks his own destruction—or that burial by drowning sought in the sea should turn us into food, or that our bodies may not be lacerated by steel. On this account it is that, out of pity, nature has produced a substance which is very easily taken, and by which we are extinguished, our body undefiled and retaining all its blood, effortlessly, like thirsty men—in such a way that neither bird nor beast will touch the body, but that man is preserved for Earth, who has perished by his own hands.

156 *quin et uenena nostri miseritam instituisse credi potest ne, in taedio uitae, fames, mors terrae meritis alienissima, lenta nos consumeret tabe, ne lacerum corpus abrupta dispergerent, ne laquei torqueret poena praepostera—incluso spiritu, cui quaereretur exitus—ne in profundo quaesita morte sepultura pabulo fieret, ne ferri cruciatus scinderet corpus. ita est, miserita genuit id, cuius facillimo haustu inlibato corpore et cum toto sanguine exstingueremur, nullo labore, sitientibus similes—qualiter defunctos non uolucres, non ferae attingerent terraeque seruaretur, qui sibi ipsi periisset.*



Roman lead mines, Charterhouse

157 But let us acknowledge: Earth has produced the remedy for all our ills, but we have converted it into the poison destructive of our life. Example: iron, which we cannot do without, do we not use that in a similar way? However, we should have no right to complain, even had Earth born this to harm us, since we are *not* grateful to any *one* of Earth's elements – for with how many delights and insults does She not serve us? She is dumped into the sea, or is excavated to create channels. At all hours She is tortured by water, iron, fire, stone, fire, crops, and far more, in order to minister to our luxuries rather than our needs.

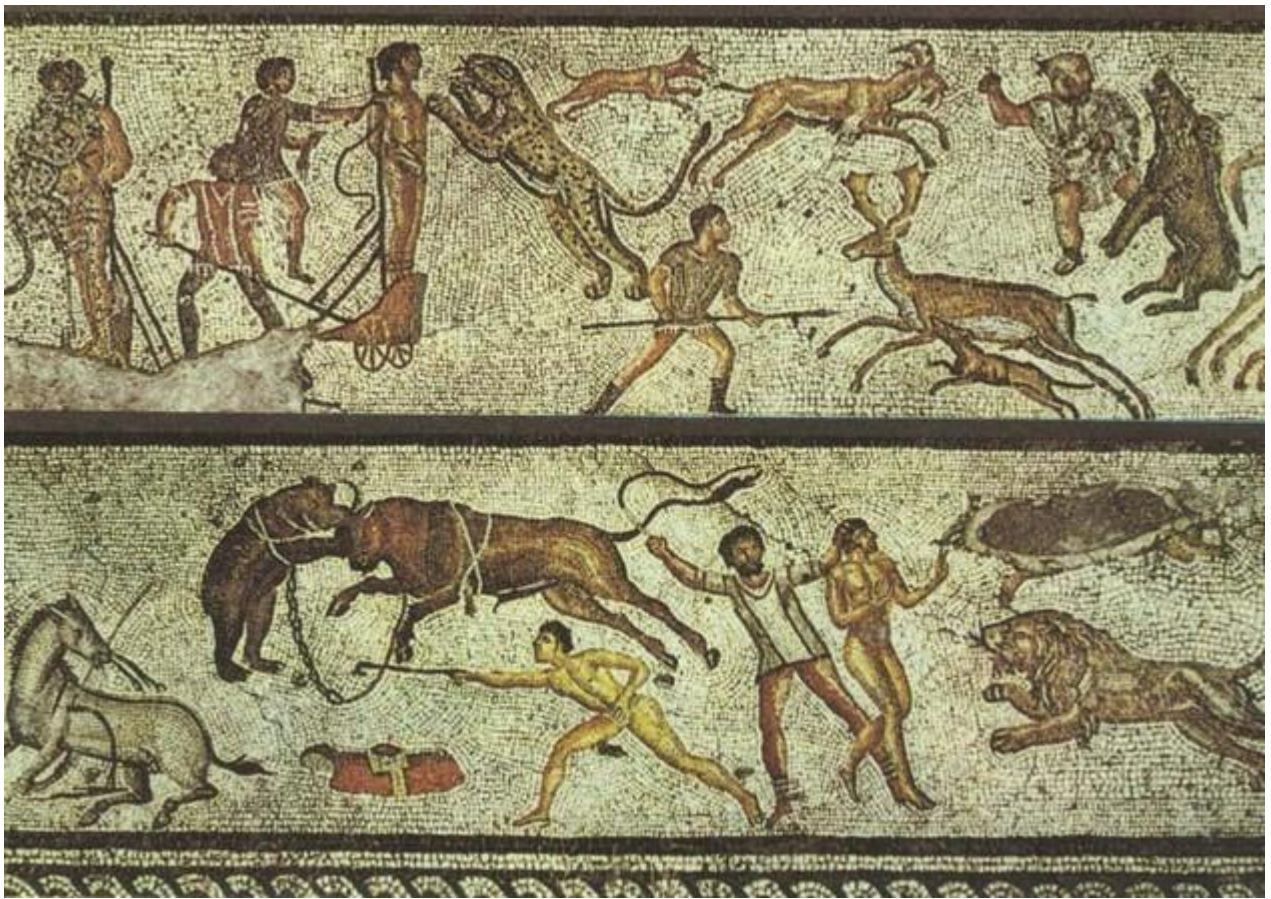
157 *uerum fateamur: terra nobis malorum remedium genuit, nos illud uitae facimus uenenum. non enim et ferro, quo carere non possumus, simili modo utimur? nec tamen quereremur merito, etiamsi maleficii causa tulisset. aduersus unam quippe naturae partem ingrati sumus—quas non ad delicias quasque non ad contumelias seruit homini? in maria iacitur aut, ut freta admittamus, eroditur. aquis, ferro, igni, ligno, lapide, fruge omnibus cruciatur horis multoque plus, ut deliciis quam ut alimentis famuletur nostris.*



Roman gold mine (*Alburnus Maior*, Romania)

158 However, so that what She puts up with on the outer surface of Her skin might seem tolerable, we penetrate into Her inner parts, digging out the veins of gold and silver, and deposits of copper and lead; we even search for gems and certain small stones, driving shafts deep into Her. We tear out Her entrails, seeking for a gem to load on our finger. How many hands are worn down to make one little knuckle gleam! If there were any beings in the underworld, these underground tunnels of avarice and luxury would certainly have dug them up. And we are amazed if this same Earth should have produced some things to harm us!

158 *ut tamen quae summa patitur atque extrema cute tolerabilia uideantur, penetramus in uiscera, auri argentique uenas et aeris ac plumbi metalla fodientes, gemmas etiam et quosdam paruulos quaerimus lapides, scrobibus in profundum actis. uiscera eius extrahimus, ut digito gestetur, gemma petitur. quot manus atteruntur, ut unus niteat articulus! si ulli essent inferi, iam profecto illos auaritiae atque luxuriae cuniculi refodissent. et miramur, si eadem ad noxam genuit aliqua!*



Assorted Roman wild animals

159 But it is my belief that the wild animals protect Her and keep off our sacrilegious hands. Do we not dig among serpents, and handle those veins of gold among poisonous roots? But in our dealings with Her we find the goddess all the kinder to us for this reason, that all these activities resulting in wealth end in crimes, slaughter, and war, and we drench Her with our blood and cover Her with unburied bones—however, as if our madness has been purified by these, over time She draws Herself over them and conceals the crimes of mortals. I consider the ignorance of Her nature as one of the evil effects of an ungrateful mind.

159 *ferae enim, credo, custodiunt illam arcentque sacrilegas manus. non inter serpentes fodimus et uenas auri tractamus cum ueneni radicibus? placatiore tamen dea utimur ob haec, quod omnes hi opulentiae exitus ad scelera caedesque et bella tendunt, quodque sanguine nostro rigamus insepultisque ossibus tegimus—quibus tamen uelut expurgato furore, tandem ipsa se obducit et scelera quoque mortalium occultat. inter crimina ingrati animi et hoc duxerim quod naturam eius ignoramus.*



Claudius Ptolemy's world map (c. AD 150, here in a 1593 version, including the New World). The map was first constructed from Ptolemy's co-ordinates in Byzantium in 1295

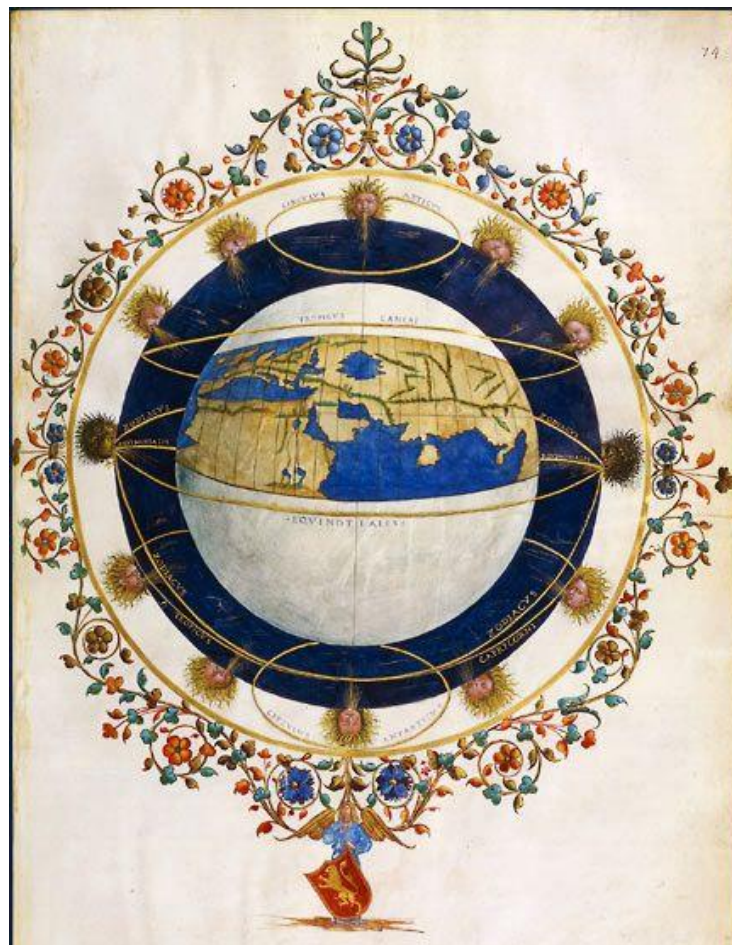
160 Its shape is the first fact about which there is general agreement. We always speak of the earth as a sphere, and we admit it to be a globe bounded by the poles. However, it is not the form of an absolute sphere, from the number of lofty mountains and flat plains; but its figure, if the end of all its [internal] radii were extended to its circumference, would compose a perfect sphere ... [one created] by the continual revolution of the universe around it forcing its immense globe into the form of a sphere.

160 *est autem figura prima, de qua consensus iudicat. orbem certe dicimus terrae globumque uerticibus includi fatemur. neque enim absoluti orbis est forma in tanta montium excelsitate, tanta camporum planitie, sed cuius amplexus, si capita cunctorum liniarumprehenditur ambitu, figuram absolute orbis efficiat ... inmensum eius globum in formam orbis adsidua circa eam mundi uolubilitate cogente.*

Disputes: why do men not fall off? Or the earth itself not fall? And how can the sea be round? 2.161-4

161 Here there is a great dispute between the learned and the man in the street: that men are dispersed all over the earth, that they stand with their feet turned towards each other, that the vault of the sky is the same for all of them, and that in the same way they tread down wherever they are towards the middle of the earth, **A** but with the man in the street asking why those on the opposite side to us do not fall off, as if there would not be an equally reasonable reply that those on the opposite side do not wonder that we do not fall off.

161 *ingens hic pugna litterarum contraque uulgi, circumfundi terrae undique homines, conuersisque inter se pedibus stare, et cunctis similem esse uerticem, simili modo et quacumque parte media calcari, A illo quaerente, cur non decidant contra siti, tamquam non ratio praesto sit, ut nos non decidere mirentur illi.*



Claudius Ptolemy's rather decorative world map (1465 version)

162 But of how little moment is this, when we have another miracle rising up to our notice—the earth itself hangs suspended and does not fall together with us, whether this is from the force of a spirit which is first and foremost a feature of the

universe may be in doubt, or whether it could fall, with nature resisting and denying it a place to fall to. For as the seat of fire is nowhere but in fire, nor of water except in water, nor of air except in air, so there is no situation for the earth except in itself, everything else repelling it.

162 *sed quid hoc refert, alio miraculo exoriente—pendere ipsam ac non cadere nobiscum, ceu spiritus uis, mundo praesertim inclusi, dubia sit, aut possit cadere, natura repugnante et quo cadat negante. nam sicut ignium sedes non est nisi in ignibus, aquarum nisi in aquis, spiritus nisi in spiritu, sic terrae, arcentibus cunctis, nisi in se locus non est.*



163 But what the uneducated argue most strenuously about is whether it is compelled to believe that the configuration of the sea is forced into a rounded shape; yet there is nothing more obvious to the sight in any aspect of nature. For when drops of liquid hang down, they assume the form of small globes, and being covered with dust, or placed on the downy surface of leaves, they are observed to be completely round; and in full cups there is a meniscus in the middle—but on account of the transparency of the fluid and its inherent fluidity, this feature of them is more easily ascertained by reason than by observation ...

163 *sed uulgo maxime haec pugna est, si coactam in uerticem aquarum quoque figuram credere cogatur. atqui non aliud in rerum natura adspectu manifestius. namque et dependentes ubique guttae paruis globantur orbibus, et pulueri inlatae, frondiumque lanugini inpositae, absoluta rotunditate cernuntur, et in poculis repletis media maxime tument—quae propter subtilitatem umoris mollitiamque in se residentem, ratione facilius quam uisu deprehenduntur ...*



164 And the same reasoning explains why the land which is not visible from the deck of a ship can be seen from the mast; and that when a vessel recedes into the distance, if any bright object is fixed to the top of the mast, it seems gradually to sink down and finally disappear. Finally, the ocean, which we admit to be without limits—with what other configuration could it hold together and not fall away, without any boundary to contain it? And it ranks with the marvellous, how it is that, although it is shaped like a sphere, the very edge of the sea does not fall away.

164 *eadem est causa, propter quam e nauibus terra non cernatur, e nauium malis conspicua; ac procul recedente nauigio, si quid quod fulgeat religetur in mali cacumine, paulatim descendere uideatur et postremo occultetur. denique oceanus, quem fatemur ultimum—quanam alia figura cohaereret atque non decideret, nullo ultra margine includente? id ipsum ad miraculum redit, quonam modo, etiamsi globetur, extremum non decidat mare.*

Next week: human beings