

BELLARIA XLIII



Pliny the Elder, Sta Maria Maggiore, Como

PLINY THE ELDER 4

Mankind

Last week Pliny explained how our immobile world was the ‘pivot’ around which the universe circulated, upholding everything by its rotational movement, and described Earth as divine, a providential ‘Mother Nature’, the equivalent of god.

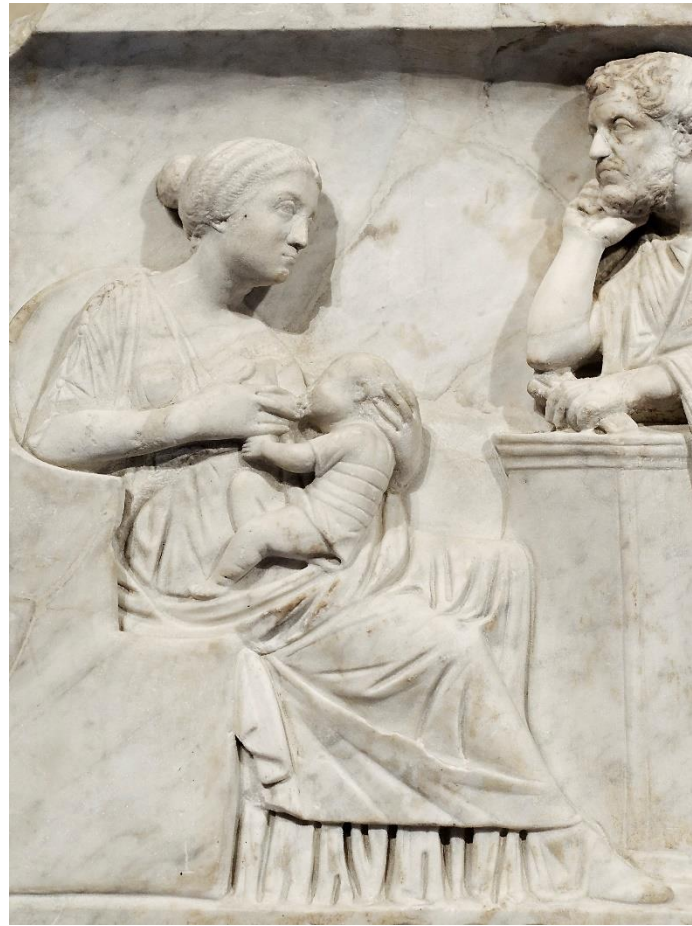
In Book 7, he turns to the animal world, starting at the top of the ladder with *homo*, ‘the human’, mankind, and suggests that, while nature produced everything for man’s sake, Nature may not have been so kindly in one aspect of man’s existence.

Babies, 7.1-8

1 The world and in it its countries, nations, seas, notable rivers, islands and cities are like that. The nature of the animals in it is scarcely less important than contemplation of almost any other feature, if, indeed, the human mind is able to embrace the whole of so diversified a subject. Our first attention is rightly due to the human, for whose sake all other things seem to have been produced by great Nature, though with a cruel price for all her great gifts, so that it is far from easy to determine, whether she has proved to him a kind parent, or a merciless step-mother.

1 *mundus et in eo terrae, gentes, maria, flumina insignia, insulae, urbes ad hunc modum se habent. animantium in eodem natura nullius prope partis contemplatione minor, etsi ne hic quidem omnia exsequi humanus animus queat. principium iure tribuetur homini, cuius causa uidetur cuncta alia genuisse natura*

magna, saeua mercede contra tanta sua munera, non ut sit satis aestimare, parens melior homini an tristior nouerca fuerit.



Sarcophagus. c. AD 150

2 In the first place, him alone of all animals she clothes with unhelpful resources. To other animals she has given various kinds of coverings—shells, crusts, spines, hides, furs, bristles, hair, down, feathers, scales, and fleeces. Even the very tree-trunks she has protected from heat and cold by a bark, in some cases in a double layer. Humanity alone on the day of their birth she abandons naked upon the naked earth to instant cries and lamentations and something no other animal experiences—to tears, and these at the very moment a man is born. But as for laughter, by Hercules!—that at its earliest is granted to no human before the fortieth day from birth.

2 ante omnia unum animantium cunctorum alienis uelat opibus. ceteris sua uarie tegimenta tribuit, testas, cortices, coria, spinas, uillos, saetas, pilos, plumam, pinnas, squamas, uellera. truncos etiam arboresque cortice, interdum gemino, a frigore et calore tutata est: hominem tantum nudum et in nuda humo natali die abicit ad uagitus statim et ploratum, nullumque tot animalium aliud ad lacrimas, et has protinus uitae principio; at Hercule risus praecox ille et celerrimus ante XL diem nulli datur.



Swaddled babies

3 From this first experience of the light, bondage and swaddling that no animals born in our midst would accept swaddles all the limbs. And so, happily born, there lies the animal, fast bound hand and foot, weeping aloud—the one destined to rule all others—and inaugurates his existence from a position of punishment for one fault alone—being born. Alas for the madness of those who think that from these beginnings they have been born to superior status!

3 *ab hoc lucis rudimento quae ne feras quidem inter nos genitas uincula excipiunt et omnium membrorum nexus; itaque feliciter natus iacet manibus pedibusque deuinctis, flens animal—ceteris imperaturum—et a suppliciis uitam auspicatur unam tantum ob culpam, qua natum est. heu dementia ab his initiis existimantium ad superbiam se genitos!*



4 The first promise of future strength, and the first gift of time, make him look like a four-footed animal. When does a human walk? When talk? When is the mouth fitted for proper food? How long does the fontanelle pulsate, sure sign that the human is the weakest of all animals? And then, the diseases and the numerous remedies devised against his maladies, and those thwarted every now and then by new forms of disease! Other animals have an instinctive knowledge of their natural powers; some make use of their speed, some their rapidity of flight, and some their power of swimming. The human knows nothing, learns nothing without being taught, cannot speak, walk, feed himself and, in short, can do nothing naturally—except cry. As a result, many are of the opinion that it were best not to be born or to die as soon as possible.

4 *prima roboris spes, primumque temporis munus, quadripedi similem facit. quando homini incessus? quando uox? quando firmum cibus os? quam diu palpitans uertex, summae inter cuncta animalia inbecillitatis indicium! iam morbi totque medicinae contra mala excogitatae, et hae quoque subinde nouitatibus uictae! et cetera sentire naturam suam, alia pernicitatem usurpare, alia praepetes uolatus, alia nare: hominem nihil scire, nihil sine doctrina, non fari, non ingredi, non uesci, breuiterque non aliud naturae sponte quam flere! itaque multi extitere qui non nasci optimum censerent aut quam ocissime aboleri.*



Fulvia rejoices at the sight of Cicero's head (Francisco Maura Y Montaner, 1888)

5 To humans alone of all animals have been granted grief, to them alone self-indulgence in innumerable ways, and through every limb, to them alone ambition, alone greed, alone a boundless desire for life, alone superstition, alone anxiety for burial and even what is to become of them after death. For none is life more fragile; for none are their greater desires for all things, none more open to bewildering fear; none actuated by more violent rage. In fine, other animals live honestly with their own kind. We see them unite to make a stand against those of a different species: the fierceness of the lion is not expended in fighting among themselves; the bite of the serpent is not aimed at the serpent; and the monsters of the sea even, and the fishes, vent their rage only on those of a different species. But—by Hercules!—for humans most of their misfortunes are occasioned by fellow-humans.

5 *uni animantium luctus est datus, uni luxuria et quidem innumerabilibus modis ac per singula membra, uni ambitio, uni auaritia, uni inmensa uiuendi cupido, uni superstitio, uni sepulturae cura atque etiam post se de futuro. nulli uita fragilior, nulli rerum omnium libido maior, nulli pauor confusior, nulli rabies acrior. denique cetera animantia in suo genere probe degunt. congregari uidemus et stare contra dissimilia: leonum feritas inter se non dimicat, serpentium morsus non petit serpentes, ne maris quidem beluae ac pisces nisi in diuersa genera saeuiunt. at Hercule—homini plurima ex homine sunt mala.*

Humanity's variety

After this beginning, one might have expected Pliny to expand on humans with some sort of analytical classification extending across the seven (or however many—it could have been four, five, ten, twelve up to twenty) ages of man. But no. What fascinates Pliny, as he has shown from his description of humanity's very earliest years, is the way in which humans match nature only in their endless variety and difference. You want 'otherness' (blame Hegel), you got it. There follows a fine series of fascinating facts, and not a few fancies.

Other cultures 7.21-23

21 India and parts of Ethiopia especially teem with marvels. The biggest animals grow in India: for instance Indian dogs are bigger than any others. Indeed the trees are said to be of such a height that they cannot be overshoot by arrows; that, if one is willing to believe it, squadrons of cavalry are able to shelter beneath a single fig-tree; and that reeds are of such height that sometimes a single section between two knots will make a canoe that will carry three people.

21 praecipue India Aethiopumque tractus miraculis scatent. maxima in India gignuntur animalia: indicio sunt canes grandiores ceteris. arbores quidem tantae proceritatis traduntur, ut sagittis superiaci nequeant; et, si libeat credere, ut sub una fico turmae condantur equitum; harundines vero tantae proceritatis ut singula internodia alueo nauigabili ternos interdum homines ferant.



Gymnosophists

22 It is known that many of the inhabitants exceed five cubits [7.5 feet] in height, never spit, are not affected by headache or toothache or pain in the eyes, and very rarely have a pain in any other part of the body—so hardened are they by the temperate heat of the sun; and that the sages of their race, whom they call gymnosophists, stay standing from sunrise to sunset, gazing at the sun with eyes unmoving, and continue all day long standing first on one foot and then on the other in the glowing sand.

22 multos ibi quina cubita constat longitudine excedere, non expuere, non capitis aut dentium aut oculorum ullo dolore adfici, raro aliarum corporis partium—tam moderato solis uapore durari. philosophos eorum, quos gymnosophistas uocant, ab exortu ad occasum perstare contuentes solem immobilibus oculis, feruentibus harenis toto die alternis pedibus insistere.



Skiapods and other assorted mankind from Pliny's *Natural History*

23 On the mountain named Nulus there are people with their feet turned backwards, and with eight toes on each foot, says the writer Megasthenes; and that on many of the mountains there is a tribe of human beings with dogs' heads, clothed in wild beasts' skins, that they emit barks for speech, that armed with finger-nails they live by hunting and fowling, for which they use their nails as weapons; and that there were more than 120,000 of them, when he published his work.

Ctesias writes that also, among a certain race of India, the women bear children only once in their lifetime, and the children turn grey directly after birth; that a tribe of men who are called the Monocoli have only one leg, with surprising speed at jumping; that, in addition, they are called the Umbrella-foot tribe, because in the hotter weather, lying on their backs on the ground, they protect themselves with the shadow of their feet; and that they are not far away from the Trogodytae; and again westward from these, there are some people without necks, having their eyes in their shoulders.

23 *in monte, cui nomen est Nulo, homines esse auersis plantis, octonos digitos in singulis habentes, auctor est Megasthenes; in multis autem montibus genus hominum capitibus caninis ferarum pellibus uelari, pro uoce latratum edere, unguibus armatum uenatu et aucupio uesci; horum supra centum uiginti milia fuisse, prodente se.*

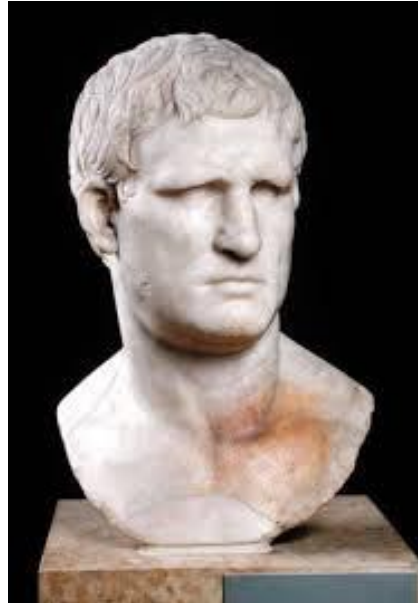
Ctesias scribit, et in quadam gente Indiae, feminas semel in uita parere, genitosque confestim canescere. idem hominum genus, qui Monocoli uocarentur, singulis cruribus, mirae pernecitatis ad saltum; eodem Sciapodas uocari, quod in maiore aestu, humi iacentes resupini, umbra se pedum protegant. non longe eos a Trogodytis abesse, rursusque ab his occidentem uersus, quosdam sine ceruice oculos in umeris habentes.

Breech births, 7.45-46

45 Being born feet foremost is contrary to nature, by which reasoning they call them [such children] 'Agrippas', as 'born with difficulty', in which manner they say Marcus Agrippa was born, in probably the only example of a successful career among all those so born, although—because of his unfortunate lameness of foot, his

miserable youth, his lifetime passed amidst warfare and painful closeness to death, his complete misfortune caused to the world by his whole progeny, but especially through his two daughters who bore the emperors Gaius Caligula and Domitius Nero, the two firebrands of mankind;

45 in pedes procidere nascentem contra naturam est, quo argumento eos appellavere 'Agrippas' ut aegre partos, qualiter et M. Agrippam ferunt genitum, unico prope felicitatis exemplo in omnibus ad hunc modum genitis. quamquam is quoque adversa pedum validudine, misera iuventa, exercito aevo inter arma mortesque ac noxia accessu, infelici terris stirpe omni, sed per utrasque Agrippinas maxime, quae Gaium, quae Domitium Neronem principes genuere totidem faces generis humani,



Marcus Agrippa: not a happy bunny

46 and especially through the shortness of his life, as he was cut off at the age of fifty, during the agony caused him by his wife's adulteries, and during his irksome subjection to his father-in-law Augustus—he is said to have paid the price of for his irregular birth. That Nero also, who was emperor shortly before, and whose entire rule showed him the enemy of mankind, was born feet first is stated in his mother Agrippina's memoirs. It is Nature's method that a human be born head first, and custom that he be carried to burial feet first.

46 praeterea breuitate aeui, quinquagesimo uno raptus anno, in tormentis adulteriorum coniugis, socerique praegraui seruitio, luisse augurium praeposteri natalis existimatur. Neronem quoque, paulo ante principem, et toto principatu suo hostem generis humani, pedibus genitum scribit parens eius Agrippina. ritus naturae hominem capite gigni, mos est pedibus efferri.



Castors and Polluxes (ancient, and a modern copy of a Roman original by Joseph Nollekens)

52 As far as likeness goes, there is an immense amount of thinking, and one in which many fortuitous circumstances are believed to be influential—recollections of sights and sounds, and actual sense-impressions received at the moment of conception. Also a thought suddenly flitting across the mind of either parent is supposed to produce a likeness or to cause a combination of features, and for this reason there are more differences in man than in all the other animals, since his swiftness of thought and quickness of mind and diversity of temperament impress a great variety of features, whereas the minds of the other animals are fixed, and are alike for all and sundry, each in their own kind.

52 *similitudinem quidem inmensa reputatio est, et in qua credantur multa fortuita pollere, uisus, auditus, memoria, haustaeque imagines sub ipso conceptu. cogitatio etiam utriuslibet animum subito transuolans effingere similitudinem aut miscere existimatur, ideoque plures in homine quam in ceteris omnibus animalibus differentiae, quoniam uelocitas cogitationum animique celeritas et ingenii uarietas multiformes notas inprimit, cum ceteris animantibus immobiles sint animi et similes omnibus singulis in suo cuique genere.*

53 A pleb named Artemon so closely resembled Antiochus, king of Syria, that his queen Laodice, after she had murdered her husband, successfully made use of him to stage a play of her being recommended for succession to the throne. As for Pompey the Great, a plebeian named Vibius and one Publicius, who was actually a liberated slave, were almost indistinguishable from him in appearance, both reproducing that noble countenance and the actual dignity of his magnificent brow.

53 *Antiocho regi Syriae e plebe nomine Artemo in tantum similis fuit, ut Laodice coniunx regia, necato iam Antiocho, mimum per eum commendationis regnique successionis peregerit. Magno Pompeio Vibius quidam e plebe et Publicius, etiam seruitute liberatus, indiscreta prope specie fuere similes, illud os probum reddentes ipsumque honorem eximia frontis.*



A blotchy Marc Antony *comtumelia furens*

56 The slave-dealer Toranius, when [Marc] Antony became one of the triumvirate, sold him two exceptionally handsome boys, one a native of Asia and the other from across the Alps, as twins, such was their similarity. After, when—the fraud given away by the boys' speech—a protest was made to the dealer by the wrathful Antony, complaining among other things about the size of the payment (he had bought them for 200,000ss), the dealer, a man of practised ingenuity, replied that he had charged so much for that very reason, because there was nothing remarkable in a likeness between any brothers from the same womb; but to find offspring of different races of so identical an appearance was beyond all evaluation; and this produced in Antony so timely a feeling of admiration that this very soul of proscription, just recently in a fury of abuse, thought that nothing else in his property was more in keeping with his position in life!

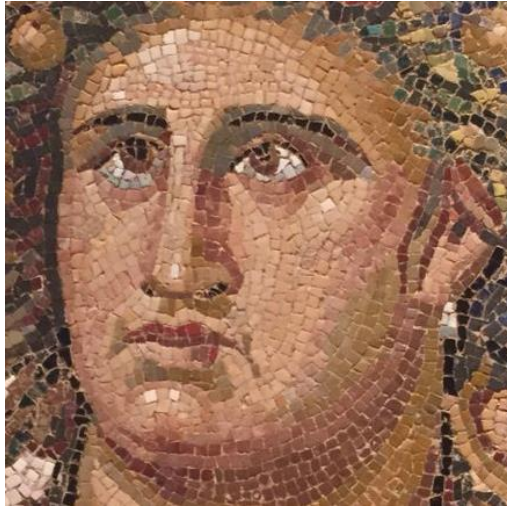
56 Toranius mango Antonio iam triumuiro eximios forma pueros, alterum in Asia genitum, alterum trans Alpibus, ut geminos uendidit: tanta unitas erat. postquam—deinde sermone puerorum detecta fraude—a furente increpitus Antonio est, inter alia magnitudinem preti conquerente (nam ducentis erat mercatus sestertiis), respondit uersutus ingenii mango, id ipsum se tanti uendidisse, quoniam non esset mira similitudo in ullis eodem utero editis; diuersarum quidem gentium natales tam concordi figura reperire super omnem esse taxationem; adeoque tempestiuam admirationem intulit, ut ille proscriptor animus, modo et contumelia furens, non aliud in censu magis ex fortuna sua duceret!

Keen sight, 7.85

85 Keeness of sight has produced examples transcending belief in the highest degree. Inside a nutshell—that is where Cicero records that a copy of Homer's poem *The Iliad*, written on parchment, was enclosed. He also records that there had been a man who could see 123 miles. Marcus Varro also gives this man's name—he was called Strabo ['cross-eyed']; and that in the Punic Wars, from the promontory of Lilybaeum in Sicily, he was accustomed to tell the actual number of ships in a fleet emerging from the harbour of Carthage. Callicrates used to make such small ivory models of ants and other creatures that to anybody else their parts were invisible. A

certain Myrmecides won fame in the same department by making a four-horse chariot out of the same material, such that a fly's wings would cover it, and also a ship that a tiny bee could conceal with its wings.

85 *oculorum acies uel maxime fidem excedentia inuenit exempla. in nuce inclusam Iliadem Homeri carmen in membrana scriptum tradit Cicero. idem fuisse qui peruideret CXXXV passuum. huic et nomen M. Varro reddit: Strabonem uocatum; solitum autem Punico bello, a Lilybaeo Siciliae promunturio, exeunte classe e Carthaginiis portu, etiam numerum nauium dicere. Callicrates ex ebore formicas et alia tam parua fecit animalia, ut partes eorum a ceteris cerni non possent. Myrmecides quidam in eodem genere inclaruit quadriga ex eadem materia, quam musca integeret alis, fabricata et naue, quam apicula pinnis absconderet.*



Not Strabo

Sudden deaths, 7.180-181, 183

180 But most miraculous and also frequent, are sudden deaths (this is life's supreme happiness), which we shall show to be natural. Verrius has reported a great many, but we will preserve moderation with a selection. Cases of people who died of joy are Sophocles and Dionysius the tyrant of Sicily, in both cases after receiving news of a victory with a tragedy; also the mother who saw her son back safe from Cannae in contradiction of a false message [sc. of his death]; Diodorus the professor of logic died of shame, because he could not at once solve a problem put to him as a joke by Stilpo ...

180 *in primis autem miraculo sunt summaque frequentia mortes repentinae—hoc est summa uitae felicitas—quas esse naturales docebimus. plurimas prodidit Verrius, nos cum dilectu modum seruabimus. gaudio obiere Sophocles et Dionysius Siciliae tyrannus, uterque accepto tragicae uictoriae nuntio; mater illa Cannensi filio incolumi reuiso contra nuntium falsum; pudore Diodorus sapientiae dialecticae professor, lusoria quaestione non protinus ab interrogatione Stilponis dissoluta ...*



Who's next?

181 Cases of men dying from no obvious causes are: while putting on their shoes in the mornings, the two Caesars, the praetor and the ex-praetor, father of the dictator Caesar—the latter dying at Pisa and the former at Rome—Quintus Fabius Maximus on 31 December in the year of his consulship, in whose place Gaius Rebilus obtained the office for only a few hours; also the senator Gaius Volcatius Gurgus—all of these men so healthy and fit that they were thinking of going out for a walk; Quintus Aemilius Lepidus who bruised his great toe in a doorway of his bedroom just as he was going out, Gaius Aufustius who after he had left on his way to the senate, hit his foot [against something] in the comitium...

181 *nulla euidetibus causis obiere, dum calciantur matutino, duo Caesares, praetor et praetura perfunctus dictatoris Caesaris pater—hic Pisis exanimatus est, ille Romae—Q. Fabius Maximus in consulatu suo pridie kal. Ian., in cuius locum C. Rebilus paucissimarum horarum consulatum petiit; item C. Volcatius Gurgus senator—omnes adeo sani atque tempestiui, ut de progrediendo cogitarent; Q. Aemilius Lepidus iam egrediens incusso pollice limini cubiculi, C. Aufustius egressus, cum in senatum iret, offenso pede in comitio...*



Well, I didn't think it was funny.

183 Only last year too, [there suddenly died] while he was whispering in the ear of a man of consular rank, a Roman *eques*, in front of the ivory Apollo which is in the Forum of Augustus; and, more than all the others, C. Julius, the physician, while he was applying some ointment by drawing the probe to the eye [of a patient]. Aulus Manlius Torquatus, a man of consular rank, [died] in the act of reaching a cake at dinner; L. Tuscus Valla, the physician, while he was taking a draught of honeyed wine; Ap. Saufeius, returning from the bath, where he had drunk honeyed wine and water, and was swallowing an egg; P. Quinctius Scapula, while he was dining with Aquilius Gallus; Decimus Saufeius, the scribe, while he was breakfasting at his house; Corn. Gallus, who had been a praetor, and the *eques* Titus Haterius, died while having sex with women; and—men whom our age marked with special disapproval—two members of the equestrian order met their end in the same pantomime actor Mysticus, at the time a man of surpassing beauty.

183 *nec non et proximo anno, dum consulari uiro in aurem dicit, eques Romanus ante Apollinem eboreum qui est in foro Augusti, super omnes C. Iulius medicus, dum inunguit, specillum per oculum trahens, A. Manlius Torquatus consularis, cum in cena placentam adpeteret; L. Tuccius medicus Valla, dum mulsi potionem haurit; Appius Saufeius, e balinea reuersus cum mulsum bibisset ouumque sorberet; P. Quintius Scapula, cum apud Aquilium Gallum cenaret; Decimus Saufeius scriba, cum domi suae pranderet; Cornelius Gallus praetorius et T. Heterius eques Romanus in uenere obiere et, quos nostra adnotauit aetas, duo equestris ordinis in eodem pantomimo Mystico, tum forma praecellente.*

Next week: which animal is closest to man? (Nice try, Mr Darwin, but wrong—hopelessly wrong)