

BELLARIA XL



Pliny the Elder, St Maria Maggiore, Como

PLINY THE ELDER 1

This next sequence of *Bellaria* will look into the sole surviving work from the many that Gaius Plinius Secundus—Pliny the Elder—composed while on service during his long career in the Roman army and navy: his mighty *Naturalis Historia* in thirty-six books, plus one more, a preface with Index and sources to all 36 books.

It covered man's view of the world of nature, embracing everything from the universe to the human, animal, vegetable and mineral world, including man's extended contributions—agriculture, sea-faring, government, warfare—and ending with art and architecture.

In the process, it deals with e.g. astronomy, geography, zoology, botany, medicine, pharmacy, chemical, minerals and metals, and all 'written for the masses, the hordes of farmers and artisans and those who have time to devote to such pursuits.' Indeed: for the world of nature was all that farmers and artisans (c. 90% of the population) had to work with. The contrast with our almost completely *unnatural*/world is striking.

Introduction

Early career

Pliny was born c. 23 AD in Como to an equestrian family (the term given to citizens worth between 400,000-1 million ss, from which the senatorial class was largely drawn). His father sent him to Rome in the 30s AD where he came under the patronage of the general Publius Pomponius Secundus (he was also a tragedian whose work was much praised by Tacitus, Quintilian and, unsurprisingly, Pliny the Younger). Pomponius was a friend of Sejanus, and was lucky only to be placed

under house arrest till Tiberius' death in AD 37. The last we hear of him is as governor of *Germania Superior* in AD 54.

Pliny took enthusiastically to the military life, serving multiple tours in Germany—*Germania Inferior* and *Superior* (under Pomponius)—from AD 46-58. During this period he met the future emperor Titus, and probably began work on his one-volume *de iaculatione equestri* ('On spear-throwing from horseback'), two-volume *de uita Pomponii Secundi* and twenty-volume *Bella Germanica*.



Pliny led campaigns against the Chauqi, one of the Germanic tribes that destroyed three Roman legions in the Teutoberger Forest in AD 9

The Neronian interval

In AD 59 Pliny returned to Rome. Pomponius was now dead, and Nero in power. Pliny regarded Nero as a *hostem generis humani* ('an enemy of the human race') but kept his head down over that period, as Pliny the Younger informs us, bringing his earlier books to a conclusion and also composing *Studiosus*, a handbook on rhetoric (six volumes) and *Dubius Sermo* on grammar (eight volumes).

Working under the Flavians

In AD 69 Nero was dead and Vespasian (Titus' father) became emperor. Pliny immediately came back into favour. From 70-76 AD he served as procurator, with

financial and military responsibilities, in Gaul, Africa, Spain and Belgium, during which time he also knocked off a 31-volume history of the period AD 50-71. It was strongly pro-Flavian.

In AD 76 he was made *praefectus* of the imperial fleet stationed in Misenum. This was largely administrative - maintaining the fleet and securing the Mediterranean grain trade – and left him time to compose his *Naturalis Historia*, an encyclopedia of the Roman world, which will be the subject of this *Bellaria* sequence.

In AD 79, he was killed responding to a cry for help from his friend Rectina, caught up in the eruption of Vesuvius.



The death of Pliny the Elder

Suetonius' *Life of Pliny the Elder* (from his *de viris illustribus*)

Plinius Secundus of Novum Comum, after performing with energy the military service required of members of the equestrian order, administered several important stewardships in succession with the utmost justice. **A** Yet he gave so much attention to liberal studies, that hardly anyone who had complete leisure wrote more than he. For instance, he gave an account in twenty volumes of all the wars which were ever carried on with Germany, besides completing the thirty-seven books of his *Natural History*.

Plinius Secundus Nouocomensis, equestribus militiis industrie functus, procurationes quoque splendidissimas et continuas summa integritate administravit, A et tamen liberalibus studiis tantam operam dedit, ut non temere quis plura in otio scripserit. itaque bella omnia, quae unquam cum Germanis gesta sunt, XX uoluminibus comprehendit, itemque Naturalis Historiae XXXVII libros absoluit.

He lost his life in the disaster in Campania. He was commanding the fleet at Misenum, and setting out in a Liburnian galley during the eruption of Vesuvius to investigate the causes of the phenomenon from nearer at hand, he was unable to return because of head winds. **B** He was suffocated by the shower of dust and ashes, although some think he was killed by a slave, whom he begged to hasten his end

when he was overcome by the intense heat. In the books here [i.e. the *Natural History*], he included 20,000 noteworthy items from his perusal of 2,000 volumes; the first book, however, is a kind of index of the 36 books that follow, and contains a summary of the whole work and the topics of its sections.

periiit clade Campaniae; cum enim Misenensi classi praeesset et, flagrante Vesuuio, ad explorandas propius causas liburnica pertendisset, nec aduersantibus uentis remeare posset, Bui pulueris ac fauillae oppressus est, uel ut quidam existimant a seruo suo occisus, quem aestu deficiens ut necem sibi maturaret orauerat. hic in libris XX milia rerum dignarum, ex lectione uoluminum circa duum milium, complexus est; primus autem liber, quasi index XXXVI librorum sequentium, consummationem totius operis et species continet titulorum.



A naval fresco from Pompeii

Pliny the Younger on how his uncle worked: *Letters* 3.5.7-17

7 Does it surprise you that a busy man found time to finish so many volumes, many of which deal with such minute details? You will wonder the more when I tell you that he for many years pleaded in the law courts, that he died in his fifty-sixth year, and that in the interval his time was taken up and his studies were hindered by the important offices he held and the duties arising out of his friendship with the Emperors. 8 But he possessed a keen intellect; he had a marvellous capacity for work, and his powers of application were enormous. He used to begin to study at night on the Festival of Vulcan [August 23, celebrating fire and (presumably) working by candlelight], not for luck but from his love of study, long before dawn; in winter he would commence at the seventh hour or at the eighth at the very latest, and often at the sixth. He could sleep at call, and it would come upon him and leave him in the middle of his work. 9 Before daybreak he would go to Vespasian—for he too was a night-worker—and then set about his official duties. On his return home he would again give to study any time that he had free.

7 miraris quod tot uolumina, multaue in his tam scrupulosa, homo occupatus absoluerit? magis miraberis si scieris illum aliquamdiu causas actitasse, decessisse anno sexto et quinquagesimo, medium tempus distentum impeditumque qua officiis maximis, qua amicitia principum, egisse. 8 sed erat acre ingenium, incredibile studium, summa uigilantia. lucubrare Vulcanalibus incipiebat, non auspicandi causa sed studendi statim a nocte multa, hieme uero ab hora septima uel cum tardissime octaua, saepe sexta. erat sane somni paratissimi, non numquam etiam inter ipsa studia instantis et deserentis.

9 *ante lucem ibat ad Vespasianum imperatorem—nam ille quoque noctibus utebatur—, inde ad delegatum sibi officium. reuersus domum quod reliquum temporis studiis reddebat.*



Writing materials

10 Often in summer after taking a meal—which with him, as in the old days, was always a simple and light one—he would lie in the sun if he had any time to spare, and a book would be read aloud, from which he would take notes and extracts. For he never read without taking extracts, and used to say that there never was a book so bad that it was not good in some passage or another. 11 After his sun bath he usually bathed in cold water, then he took a snack and a brief nap, and subsequently, as though another day had begun, he would study till dinner-time. After dinner a book would be read aloud, and he would take notes in a cursory way. 12 I remember that one of his friends, when the reader pronounced a word wrongly, checked him and made him read it again, and my uncle said to him, ‘Did you not catch the meaning?’ When his friend said ‘Yes,’ he remarked, ‘Why then did you make him turn back? We have lost more than ten lines through your interruption.’ 13 So jealous was he of every moment lost.

10 *post cibum saepe—quem interdum leuem et facilem ueterum more sumebat— aestate, si quid otii, iacebat in sole, liber legebatur, adnotabat excerpebatque. nihil enim legit quod non excerperet; dicere etiam solebat nullum esse librum tam malum ut non aliqua parte prodesset. 11 post solem plerumque frigida lauabatur, deinde gustabat dormiebatque minimum; mox, quasi alio die, studebat in cenae tempus. super hanc liber legebatur adnotabatur, et quidem cursim. 12 memini quendam ex amicis, cum lector quaedam perperam pronuntiasset, reuocasse et repeti coegisse; huic auunculum meum dixisse: ‘intellexeras nempe?’ cum ille adnuisset, ‘cur ergo reuocabas? decem amplius uersus hac tua interpellatione perdidimus.’ 13 tanta erat parsimonia temporis.*

In summer he used to rise from the dinner-table while it was still light; in winter always before the first hour had passed, as though there was a law obliging him to do so. 14 Such was his method of living when up to the eyes in work and amid the bustle of Rome. When he was in the country, the only time snatched from his work was when he took his bath—and when I say bath, I refer to the actual bathing-hall itself; for while he was being scraped with the strigil or rubbed down, he used to listen to a reader or dictate. 15 When he was travelling he cut himself aloof from every other thought and gave himself up to study alone. At his side he kept a

shorthand writer with a book and tablets, who wore mittens on his hands in winter, so that not even the sharpness of the weather should rob him of a moment, and for the same reason, when in Rome, he used to be carried in a litter. **16** I remember that once he rebuked me for walking, saying, 'If you were a student, you could not waste your hours like that,' for he considered that all time was wasted which was not devoted to study. **17** Such was the application which enabled him to compile all those volumes I have enumerated, and he left me one hundred and sixty commonplace books, written on both sides of the scrolls, and in a very small handwriting, which really makes the number of the volumes considerably more.

surgebat aestate a cena luce, hieme intra primam noctis, et tamquam aliqua lege cogente. 14 haec inter medios labores urbisque fremitum. in secessu, solum balinei tempus studiis eximebatur—cum dico balinei, de interioribus loquor; nam dum destringitur tergiturque, audiebat aliquid aut dictabat. 15 in itinere, quasi solutus ceteris curis, huic uni uacabat: ad latus notarius cum libro et pugillaribus, cuius manus hieme manicis muniebantur, ut ne caeli quidem asperitas ullum studii tempus eriperet; qua ex causa Romae quoque sella uehebatur. 16 repeto me correptum ab eo, cur ambularem: 'poteras' inquit 'has horas non perdere'; nam perire omne tempus arbitrabatur, quod studiis non impenderetur. 17 hac intentione tot ista uolumina peregit, electorumque commentarios centum sexaginta mihi reliquit, opisthographos quidem et minutissimis scriptos; qua ratione multiplicatur hic numerus.



A Roman carriage

Pliny's Preface to his *Naturalis Historia* Preface 13-32 (*passim*)

After the ritual encomium lavished over the emperor Titus and admission of presumption and impertinence at dedicating his work to him, Pliny explains what he hopes to have achieved:

13 The nature of things, and life as it actually exists, are described in these books; and often the most basic aspects of it; so that, in very many cases, I am obliged to use rustic and foreign, or even barbarian words, and these often require to be introduced by a kind of preface. **14** And, besides this, my road is not a beaten track, nor one which the mind is much disposed to travel over. There is no one among us who has ever attempted it, nor is there any one individual among the Greeks who has treated of all the topics. Most of us seek for nothing but amusement in our studies, while others are fond of subjects that are of excessive subtlety, and

wrapped in total obscurity. My object is to treat of all those things which the Greeks include in the 'Encyclopædia', which, however, are either not generally known or are rendered obscure by scholarship.

13 *rerum natura, hoc est vita, narratur, et haec sordidissima sui parte ac plurimarum rerum aut rusticis vocabulis aut externis, immo barbaris etiam, cum honoris praefatione ponendis. 14 praeterea iter est non trita auctoribus via nec qua peregrinari animus expetat. nemo apud nos qui idem temptaverit, nemo apud Graecos, qui unus omnia ea tractaverit. magna pars studiorum amoenitates quaerimus; quae vero tractata ab aliis dicuntur immensae subtilitatis, obscuris rerum tenebris premuntur. ante omnia attingenda quae Graeci τῆς ἐγκυκλίου παιδείας vocant, et tamen ignota aut incerta ingeniis facta.*

15 And there are other subjects to which many writers have devoted so much detail that they have become tedious. It is, indeed, no easy task to give a new look to what is old, and authority to what is new; lustre to what has become tarnished, and light to what is obscure; to make acceptable what is distasteful, and credible what is open to doubt; to give its true nature to everything, and all its intrinsic qualities to Nature itself. It is sufficiently honourable and high-minded to have been willing to make the attempt, even if it proves unsuccessful...

15 *alia vero ita multis prodita, ut in fastidium sint adducta. res ardua vetustis novitatem dare, novis auctoritatem, obsoletis nitorem, obscuris lucem, fastiditis gratiam, dubiis fidem, omnibus vero naturam et naturae suae omnia. itaque etiam non assecutis voluisse abunde pulchrum atque magnificum est.*

17 We have included 20,000 topics, all worthy of attention (for, as Domitius Piso says, we ought to make not merely books, but works of reference), derived from about 2,000 volumes, of which only a few are read by scholars, such is the obscurity of the subjects, and procured from by careful research into 100 select authors, in thirty-six volumes; adding very much else, which was either not known to my predecessors, or life has lately discovered.

17 *viginti milia rerum dignarum cura—quoniam, ut ait Domitius Piso, thesauros oportet esse, non libros—lectione voluminum circiter duorum milium, quorum pauca admodum studiosi attingunt propter secretum materiae, ex exquisitis auctoribus centum, inclusimus XXXVI voluminibus, adiectis rebus plurimis, quas aut ignoraverant priores aut postea invenerat vita.*



Result of a hard night's scrolling

18 Nor can I doubt but that there still remain many things which have pased me by; for I am a mere mortal, and one that has many official duties. I have, therefore, been obliged to compose this work at odd intervals, that is at night, in case anyone thinks I have been idle then! The days I devote to you, sleeping just enough to keep me healthy, and contenting myself with this reward, that while we occupy ourselves on these matters (according to the remark of Varro), we are prolonging our lives by many hours; for life properly consists in being awake ...

18 *nec dubitamus multa esse quae et nos praeterierint. homines enim sumus, et occupati officiis, subsicivisque temporibus ista curamus, id est nocturnis, ne quis vestrum putet his cessatum horis. dies vobis inpendimus, cum somno valetudinem computamus, vel hoc solo praemio contenti, quod, dum ista, ut ait M. Varro, musinamur, pluribus horis vivimus. profecto enim vita vigilia est...*

21 You may judge my professionalism by my insertion, in the beginning of my book, of the names of the authors that I have consulted. I consider it to be courteous and to indicate a liberal-minded modesty, to acknowledge the sources which have helped us, and not to act as most of those have done whom I have examined. **22** For I must inform you that, in comparing different authors, I have found that some of the oldest authorities have been simply copied out word for word, without acknowledgement, by the most reliable and modern authors ... **23** It is indeed the mark of a mean spirit and miserable disposition, to prefer being caught committing a theft, rather than repaying the loan, especially when capital accumulates from interest...

21 *argumentum huius stomachi mei habebis quod in his voluminibus auctorum nomina praetexui. est enim benignum, ut arbitrator, et plenum ingenui pudoris fateri per quos profeceris, non ut plerique ex iis, quos attigi, fecerunt. 22 scito enim conferentem auctores me deprehendisse a iuratissimis et proximis veteres transcriptos ad verbum neque nominatos ... 23 obnoxii profecto animi et infelicis ingenii est deprehendi in furto malle quam mutuuum reddere, cum praesertim sors fiat ex usura ...*

He ends by saying he has included an Index of contents (the remainder of Book 1) so that Titus, and anyone else who wants to consult the book, would not have to scroll through all 36 books to find what he wants. It consists of a series of book-by-book lists of subject matter ordered by appearance in the text, with a full list of authorities consulted at the end of each book. Better than nothing, one supposes.

The following pdf from the Loeb translation gives some idea of that index. It contains the end of the list of drugs from cultivated trees, numbers the observations, quotes the sources, and introduces the section on drugs from forest trees. This is one of 142 pages...

myrtle-berry wine 13, Prickly myrtle or ground-myrtle or butcher's broom 6. Total 1418 drugs, investigations and observations.

Authorities: Gaius Valgius, Pompeius Lenaeus, Sextius Niger's Greek writings, Julius Bassus's *ditto*, Antonius Castor, Marcus Varro, Cornelius Celsus, Fabianus. Foreign authorities: Theophrastus, Democritus, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Mago, Menander's *Things serviceable for life*, Nicander, Homer, Hesiod, Musaeus, Sophocles, Anaxilaus. Medical writers: Mnesitheus, Callimachus, Phania's *Natural Science*, Timaristus, Simus, Hippocrates, Chrysippus, Diocles, Ophion, Heraclides, Hicesius, Dionysius, Apollodorus of Citium, Apollodorus of Tarentum, Praxagoras, Plistonius, Medius, Dieuches, Cleophantes, Philistion, Asclepiades, Crateuas, Petronius Diodotus, Iollas, Erasistratus, Diagoras, Andreas, Mnesides, Epicharmus, Damion, Dalion, Sosimenes, Tlepolemus, Metrodorus, Solon, Lycus, Olympias of Thebes, Philinus, Petrichus, Miccio, Glaucias, Xenocrates.

Book XXIV. Contents: Drugs obtained from forest trees: (ii-ix) Egyptian water-lily 6, acorns 13, holm-oak berry 3, oak-apple 23, mistletoe 11, acorns of glandiferous trees 1, Turkey oak 8, cork 2, beech 4. (x-xix) Cypress 23, cedar 13, cedar-berry 10, galbanum 23, gumtree 24, styrax gumtree 10, bear's-foot 17, sphagnus or sphacus or moss 5, turpentine 6, pitch-pine 8. (xx-xxix) Ground-pine 10, pityusa 6, resin 22, pitch 34, cedar-resin oil or twice-boiled pitch 16, earth-pitch 2, wax-pitch 1, pitch-pine 1, mastic-tree 22, plane 25. (xxx-xxxix) Beech 5, maple 1, poplar 8, elm 16, lime 5, elder 15, juniper 21, willow 14, Amerian apple 1, chaste-tree 33, heath 1. (xl-xlix)

Next week: Pliny on the universe