

MODERN DISCIPLINES AND THE TRANSFORMING RECEPTION OF A TEXT

Aude Doody, *Pliny's Encyclopedia. The reception of Natural philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ISBN-13-978-0-521-49103-7, pp. VIII+194

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Since its appearance in the first century A.D., Pliny's *Natural History* has been not only widely read, but also often used in the process of producing knowledge. The great variety of themes Pliny wrote about made him a relevant author for scholars in very different fields, not only during the centuries in which he represented a scientific authority, but also for the recent studies in philosophy or history of ideas, of art, of medicine, of the Roman Empire, and so on.

Aude Doody's aim is to offer a history of how Pliny's text was read and used over the centuries. The author does not regard her interpretation as exclusive; still she considers that her paradigmatic examples suffice to illustrate that a book is a very flexible object and that in its reception we can perceive the intellectual trends and interests of a period.

Pliny's Encyclopaedia is divided in four chapters, two of them focusing on the problem of how usage throughout time and by readers coming from different disciplines changes the meaning of a book, while the other two are concerned with how the book's content has been reorganized in various editions. In the first chapter, entitled "Science and encyclopaedism: the originality of the *Natural History*," the author discusses Pliny's work in the context of the ancient discipline of natural history. Doody claims that Pliny's work is new and original. In this, the author goes against the commonly received view. Offering a very rich account of the existing secondary literature, Doody argues that Pliny's lack of interest in argumentation, which he was usually criticized for, was a common feature of ancient natural histories and, moreover, represents the corollary of Pliny's concept of nature, his aim being to itemise nature's different aspects (p. 23). Pliny's approach was very influential in medieval times and during the renaissance. At the end of the renaissance, however, Pliny's natural history came under the attack of Francis Bacon, who criticised both Pliny's approach to the investigation of nature and his way of classifying facts. As a result, Pliny's *Natural history* was removed from the centre of scientific scholarship.

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The second chapter, “Diderot’s Pliny and the politics of the encyclopaedia,” investigates Pliny’s book from another perspective – considering it as an encyclopaedia. After an extensive analysis of the concept of *en cyclos paidea* and a close reading of Pliny and other so-called ‘encyclopaedists’ in Roman literature, Doody convincingly shows that *Historia naturalis* is “an encyclopaedia only in analogy with later generic models” (pp. 89-90). Nevertheless, for Diderot, the creator of this genre, Pliny represented the archetype of a good encyclopaedist, although the value of Pliny’s work as a scientific enterprise was doubtful.

In order to show how the shape of the text changed, the author provides a very detailed study of the first printed editions of Pliny’s work, focusing firstly on the changes of the *summarium* (chapter three) and then on the three books of extracts, one on medicine and two on art history (chapter four). The changes of the *summarium*, presented in the third chapter – “Finding facts: the *summarium* in the early printed editions,” highlight a change of interest, due to the editor’s belief that certain topics are essential to the structure of the text and that the reader should be able to find them promptly; the *summarium* represents “a solution for the busy reader’s problems” (p. 110).

The last chapter, “Specialist reading: art and medicine from *Natural History*,” discusses two examples of disciplines found in Pliny’s text, medicine and art. Here Doody shows that, even if for Pliny medicine is not separated from other disciplines and even if Pliny himself disapproved of specialized professional medicine (p. 137), during the fourth and sixth centuries his text and his name came to be invoked as authority in the medical field. Two books of extracts, containing only medical ideas, were published in the period 400-600. The specialist reading of various parts of *Historia naturalis* was not, moreover, confined to the Middle Ages. As Doody shows, in the nineteenth century, Pliny’s book began again to be mainly used by specialists in different fields (p. 172). To support the claim, Doody provides some examples of how Pliny’s book helped the new archaeological discoveries.

Even though the book does not present a chronological reception of Pliny’s text, we find the most important moments of it: at first, the text was read as a natural history, just as it was intended by the author, but this reading comes to an end with the experimentalism promoted by Francis Bacon at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Later on, during the eighteenth century, Pliny was considered an important precursor of the encyclopaedic culture but, from a scientific point of view, he started to lose authority. Finally, even though Pliny’s book was intended to contain general knowledge, in the nineteenth century it became a book for specialists, for whom Pliny represented an important source of information regarding the first century.

Doody’s book is a very ambitious enterprise: it covers an extensive period and touches upon very different fields, from art to medicine, from geography to politics. The importance of this book resides not only in making clear what was the purpose of the text for Pliny himself, but principally in the accuracy with which the

author places Pliny's book within the interests of scholars from different periods by examining the changes suffered by the text and the way in which it was used in order to produce knowledge.