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Ágnes Darab

Stories of Nature

On the Anecdotal Narration of Pliny's
Natural History

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Stories of Nature

On the Anecdotal Narration of Pliny's *Natural History*

Ágnes Darab

I Introduction

Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* offers a comprehensive overview of all the phenomena under the classical concept of *natura*. The popularity and recognition of the encyclopedia has been maintained for centuries by the diversity of the scientific and historical information it contains. However, *Natural History* is characterized not only by the diversity of its content, but also the exceptional complexity of text types. Pliny's philology has recently turned with great interest to the text structures, narrative units and narrative techniques of the encyclopedia.¹ This direction of research focuses on text interpretation and emphasizes receptive reading. As a result, a renewed evaluation of *Natural History* seems to be taking shape.

My own research also fits into this process. I read *Natural History* as a text written with a literary need, with its layers of meaning formed in the process of interpreting the aspects that structure the text and the applied narrative techniques. Since it is a very large-scale and heterogeneous narrative in terms of the types of texts used, the position of the interpreter must be precisely defined. I direct my analytical attention to the sometimes smaller, other times, slightly longer narrative units, the micronarratives of *Natural History*, which make this text unique in the history of encyclopedic literature. I focus on a well-known figure in ancient rhetorical theory, digressions (lat. *excessus*), most of which can be apostrophized as anecdotes in terms of genre.²

I analyze the anecdotal digressions of *Natural History* using the methods of narratology and comparative literature. The narratology associated with Tzvetan Todorov,³ also labeled as classic narratology, emphasizes the immanent interpretation that starts from the work and

This paper is an edited version of my presentation at the international workshop 'Extra-Ordinary Knowledge. Epistemic Forms of Representation in Roman Nature and Science Writing' held at the Freie Universität in Berlin (25–26 November 2022).

¹ CAREY (2003); MURPHY (2004); BEAGON (2005); FÖGEN (2009); GIBSON–MORELLO (2011); DARAB (2020); NAAS (2023).

² On the narrative and discursive criteria of the anecdote as a method of narration and transferring knowledge, see most recently MÖLLER–GRANDL (2021) 5–10.

³ E.g. TODOROV (1997).

reaches its goal in the work, while paying special attention to the description of the narrative's discursive features and the structural examination of the simpler narrative forms. This interpretive method is complemented by comparative literature, which means the comparative analysis and interpretation of the digressions' *fabula* and *sjuzet*, their Greek and Roman variants from a thematic, motivic, structural and discursive point of view. The interpretation starting from the text achieves its goal if the removed digression is placed back into the textual context from which it was extracted, i.e. into the context in which the digression can be interpreted, once the results of the narratological and comparative analysis have been registered. In my paper, I try to summarize the experiences that are the results of the anecdotal digressions of *Natural History* and their narratological and comparative analysis. To summarize the experiences that determine the role of the anecdotal digressions of *Natural History* in the basic ambition of the encyclopedia, the transfer of knowledge.

II Digression as a Rhetorical Figure

One of the paragraphs in the preface to *Natural History* clearly shows that Pliny accurately assessed the limitations of the encyclopedia's subject matter and genre:⁴

Meae quidem temeritati accessit hoc quoque, quod levioris operae hos tibi dedicavi libellos. nam nec ingenii sunt capaces, quod alioqui in nobis perquam mediocre erat, neque admittunt excessus, aut orationes sermonesve aut casus mirabiles vel eventus varios, iucunda dictu aut legentibus blanda sterili materia. rerum natura, hoc est vita, narratur.

My own presumption has indeed gone further, in dedicating to you the present volumes—a work of a lighter nature, as it does not admit of talent, of which in any case I possessed only quite a moderate amount, nor does it allow of digressions, nor of speeches or dialogues, nor marvellous accidents or unusual occurrences—matters interesting to relate or entertaining to read. My subject is a barren one—the world of nature, or in other words life. (H. Rackham)

⁴ Plin. *NH* praef. 12. I quote the Latin texts and their English translations from the volumes of Loeb Edition.

As he notes, the description of nature is a barren subject (*sterili materia*), which admits of “no digressions, nor of speeches or dialogues, nor marvellous accidents or unusual occurrences”. As we know, all these are included in the text. It is precisely these that provide the content of the digressions, and it is precisely these digressions that make the text special, and make *Natural History* a special type within classical scientific literature.⁵ The paradox that can be registered between the genre of *Natural History*, its type of text, the narrator’s statement and the narrative mode that contradicts all these, seems to be resolved from the established Roman rhetorical tradition. From the paradigm, which can hardly be overemphasized as the overriding cultural code in Roman society during the imperial period.

Digression—in Pliny’s usage *excessus*—is one of the structural elements of oratorical speech, to which Quintilian devotes a chapter in his work on rhetorical theory.⁶ On the name and content of the rhetorical figure he calls *excursus*, he says:⁷

Hanc partem παρέκβασις vocant Graeci, Latini egressum vel egressionem. Sed hae sunt plures, ut dixi, quae per totam causam varios habent excursus, ut laus hominum locorumque, ut descriptio regionum, expositio quarundam rerum gestarum vel etiam fabulosarum.

The Greeks call this *παρέκβασις*, the Romans *egressus* or *egressio* (digression). They may however, as I have said, be of various kinds and may deal with different themes in any portion of speech. For instance we may extol persons or places, describe regions, record historical or even legendary occurrences. (H. E. Butler)

Quintilian defines the function of rhetorical digression in making the speech more vivid and decorative, but considers its use permissible only if the digression fits in well with the rest of the speech:

Ego autem confiteor, hoc exspatiandi genus non modo narrationi sed etiam quaestionibus vel universis vel interim singulis opportune posse subiungi, cum res

⁵ KÖVES-ZULAUF (2002) 1081.

⁶ Quint. *Inst.* 4, 3.

⁷ Quint. *Inst.* 4, 3. 12.

*postulat aut certe permittit, atque eo vel maxime illustrari ornarique orationem, sed si cohaeret et sequitur, non si per vim cuneatur et quae natura iuncta erant distrahit.*⁸

I admit however that this form of digression can be advantageously appended, not merely to the statement of facts, but to each of different questions or to the questions as a whole, so long as the case demand, or at any rate permit it. Indeed such a practice confers great distinction and adornment on a speech, but only if the digression fits in well with the rest of the speech and follows naturally on what has preceded, not if it is thrust in like a wedge parting what should naturally come together. (H. E. Butler)

It hardly needs proof for the readers of *Natural History* that the function of Pliny's digressions cannot be described in terms of illustrating and decorating the text. Yet, the third aspect that can be read in Quintilian—namely, that the digression cannot break the train of thought, and in fact, the train of thought must bring it to life—is consistently enforced. The subject of Pliny's digressions does not differ from the subject of the narrative they are wedged into. The digressions do not seem like a foreign body in the textual corpus of *Natural History* because of their content, but because of their discursive characteristics, which are in contrast to the receiver's expectation of sterile disclosure of information.

III The Typology of Digressions in *Natural History*

When examining the digressions of *Natural History*, some kind of categorization is unavoidable. These digressions as a kind of micronarratives that can be extracted from the textual corpus, are found scattered throughout the work, they cannot be linked exclusively to any of the larger thematic–structural units of the encyclopedia. At the same time, the emphases can be recognized: the aetiological and art historical digressions are in Books 33–37, with the latter occurring mostly in Book 35, which contains the history of painting. The digressions featuring the celebrities of political public life can be found prominently in Book 7, written on anthropology, two-thirds of which are digressions. The digressions to the circus performance of wild animals described in Book 8 are inseparable from the statesmen immortalized in Book 7, who financed it, and who in some cases are as important characters in the artist anecdotes as

⁸ Quint. *Inst.* 4, 3. 4.

the artists themselves who were patronized. That is why it seems effective to organize the digressions based on their content first, and then to interpret them in terms of the common motifs recognized in them, as well as the narrative technique used in the recounting.

The digressions are partly included to explain the reason behind something, and most of them perpetuate the memory of celebrities: the lives and characters of rulers, statesmen, celebrities of public life, along with sculptors and painters. In zoological digressions, animals and ordinary people are equal characters, whose lives are connected in interdependence. The theme of *mirabilia* is also present in each of the four groups of aetiological, anthropological, anthrozoological and art historical digressions, which, however, permeates the textual space of *Natural History* in such a large proportion that it can also be defined as an independent, fifth thematic group of digressions.⁹

The narrative form of digressions varies to a great extent: it ranges from a single sentence to a “short-story” built up from a series of self-contained episodes. Nevertheless, the stories conveyed either explicitly or implicitly through digressions have certain recurring motivic, narrative and discursive characteristics, on the basis of which they can be classified as anecdotes.

IV The Aetiological Digressions

Out of the five groups of digressions just registered, the examination of the aetiological digressions is especially enlightening because these micronarratives—contrary to our genre expectations of the anecdote—are not organized around a person, that is, they are not anthropocentric.

Pliny’s description of a metal or mineral has three components: a description of its discovery or mining or production; the presentation of its properties; finally its utilization. Of these three thematic units of the narrative, the first and third are the ones that create opportunities for anecdotal digressions. The last textual unit discussing the use of the material enables lengthy art-historical summaries and, within it, the narration of numerous artist anecdotes; and the first unit describing the discovery is for digressions with aetiological content, which do not occur in large numbers, but whose narrative form is not always story-like.

⁹ KÖVES-ZULAUF (1972) 196: “plinianische Grundkategorie”; NAAS (2002) 280–292.

The one-sentence description of the creation of burnt ceruse (*cerussa usta*)¹⁰ is explained by its context: this material belongs to the list of earth-based paints,¹¹ the description of which is always the same: name, location, property, use. The description of burnt ceruse follows the same pattern:

Usta casu reperta est in incendio Piraei cerussa in urceis cremata.

Burnt ceruse was discovered by an accident, when some was burnt up in jars in a fire in Piræus. (H. Rackham)

Telling the aetiology of magnet (*magnes lapis*)¹² and glass (*vitrum*)¹³ as a story can also be explained by the context. Both origin stories introduce a new narrative unit of the given book. The description of magnet takes place when Pliny moves on to the presentation of other stones after the marbles,¹⁴ which is a bulky unit consisting of 44 chapters in Book 36.¹⁵ This long section is introduced by the magnet, which fills Pliny with admiration,¹⁶ as it is both static and dynamic, insensitive and sensitive, a manifestation of the sympathy and antipathy that operates nature, which Pliny tried to show in and with his entire work.¹⁷ After the rhetorical questions and the poetic personification, in which the attraction of the magnet is made perceptible by the image of the tightly hugging human body, follows the story of finding it, which also serves as an explanation of the name.¹⁸

¹⁰ Plin. *NH* 35, 38.

¹¹ Plin. *NH* 35, 30–50.

¹² Plin. *NH* 36, 127.

¹³ Plin. *NH* 36, 191.

¹⁴ Plin. *NH* 36, 126: *A marmoribus degredienti ad reliquorum lapidum insignes naturas quis dubitet in primis magnetem occurrere?* “As we pass from marble to the other remarkable varieties of stone, no one can doubt that it is the magnet that first of all comes to mind.” (D. E. Eichholz)

¹⁵ Plin. *NH* 36, 126–170.

¹⁶ Plin. *NH* 36, 126: *Quid enim mirabilis aut qua in parte naturae maior improbitas? [...] Quid lapidis rigore pigrius? [...] Quid ferri duritia pugnacius? [...].* “For what is more strange than this stone? In what field has Nature displayed a more perverse wilfulness? [...] What is more impassive than the stiffness of stone? [...] What is more recalcitrant than the hardness of iron?” [...] (D. E. Eichholz)

¹⁷ Plin. *NH* 37, 59: *Nunc quod totis voluminibus his docere conati sumus de discordia rerum concordiaque, quam antipathian Graeci vocavere ac sympathian, non aliter clarius intellegi potest.* “Now throughout the whole of this work I have tried to illustrate the agreement and disagreement that exist in Nature, the Greek terms for which are respectively ‘sympathia,’ or ‘natural affinity,’ and ‘antipathia,’ or ‘natural aversion.’ Here more clearly than anywhere can these principles be discerned.” (D. E. Eichholz)

¹⁸ Plin. *NH* 36, 127.

magnes appellatus est ab inuentore, ut auctor est Nicander—in Ida repertus, namque et passim inueniuntur, in Hispania quoque;—inuenisse autem fertur clavis crepidarum, baculi cuspede haerentibus, cum armenta pasceret.

According to Nicander, it was called ‘magnes’ from the name of its discover, who found it on Mount Ida. Incidentally, it is to be found in many places, including Spain. However, the story goes that Magnes discovered the stone when the nails of his sandals and the tip of his staff stuck to it as he was pasturing his herds. (D. E. Eichholz)

Then follows the characterization of the types of stone, and finally their use in medicine.¹⁹

The discussion of glass takes place when, after describing the mosaic floors, Pliny notes that over time the vaults were also decorated with mosaics, but the pieces were no longer made of stone, but of glass: It will be as well, therefore, to give some account, also, of glass.”²⁰ The anecdote about the creation of glass²¹ is more descriptive due to its function of introducing a new thematic–narrative unit:

ex ea creditur nasci Belus amnis quinque milium passuum spatio in mare perfluens iuxta Ptolemaidem coloniam. [...] fama est adpulsa naue mercatorum nitri, cum sparsi per litus epulas pararent nec esset cortinis attollendis lapidum occasio, glaebas nitri e naue subdidisse, quibus accensis, permixta harena litoris, tralucentes noui liquoris fluxisse riuos, et hanc fuisse originem vitri.

This is supposed to be the source of the River Belus, which after traversing a distance of 5 miles flows into the sea near the colony of Ptolemais. [...] There is a story that once a ship belonging to some traders in natural soda put in here and that they scattered along the shore to prepare a meal. Since, however, no stones suitable for supporting their cauldrons were forthcoming, they rested them on lumps of soda from their cargo. When these became heated and were completely mingled with the sand on the beach a strange translucent liquid flowed forth in streams; and this, it is said, was the origin of glass.

(D. E. Eichholz)

¹⁹ Plin. *NH* 36, 128–130.

²⁰ Plin. *NH* 36, 189: *Quam ob rem et vitri natura indicanda est.* “And so we must now proceed to explain also the nature of glass.” (D. E. Eichholz)

²¹ Plin. *NH* 36, 190–192.

Glass mosaics are the fragile binder material that makes the knowledge about glass part of Book 36 on marble and stone, which is itself a separate narrative unit,²² and which leads to the presentation of obsidian, and glass types of every other tint,²³ as well as to the discussion of the importance of fire in the last unit of Book 36.²⁴

V The Janus-Faced Narrative

The three aetiological digressions can be classified as anecdotes, regardless of their story-like narration. They include motifs and themes that are ever-recurring components of anecdotes. A typical anecdotal theme is the accident (lat. *casus*), which sometimes organizes the story in the form of a fire that started for an unknown reason, as in the narrative of the burnt ceruse, sometimes in the form of a new material created from materials that fuse together in the fire, such as magnet, glass, or Corinthian bronze²⁵ in its one-sentence long aetiology. Each story has a location: Piraeus, Mount Ida in Asia Minor, Phoenicia, Corinth. Characters are featured in the discovery and creation of magnet, glass and implicitly Corinthian bronze: Magnes the shepherd, traders in natural soda, and the army of Mummius. Each story has a plot and a striking ending: the discovery and creation of a previously unknown, very significant material. The anecdotal nature of these stories is also reflected in the use of words. These accidents are usually called *casus*.²⁶ The history of the invention of glass is introduced by the *fama est* formula,²⁷ which refers to oral tradition, or at least to a non-scientific source.

At the same time, Pliny gives the exact source of the etymology behind the name Magnes—*magnes lapis*: „according to Nicander, it was called ‘magnes’, from the name of its discover, who found it”,²⁸ then he specifies the location of the incident: the eponymous shepherd found the stone on Mount Ida, because “incidentally, it is to be found in many places, including Spain.”²⁹ We can also appreciate the fact that Pliny locates the place where glass was produced with striking accuracy as a narrator’s effort towards factuality: “This is supposed to be the source of the River Belus, which after traversing a distance of 5 miles flows into the sea

²² Plin. *NH* 36, 190–195.

²³ Plin. *NH* 36, 196–199.

²⁴ Plin. *NH* 36, 200–204.

²⁵ Plin. *NH* 34, 6: *Hoc casus miscuit Corintho, cum caperetur, incensa*. “This is a compound that was produced by accident, when Corinth was burned at the time of its capture;” (H. Rackham)

²⁶ Plin. *NH* 34, 6; 35, 38.

²⁷ Plin. *NH* 36, 191.

²⁸ Plin. *NH* 36, 127: *Magnes appellatus est ab inventore, ut auctor est Nicander, in Ida repertus*.

²⁹ Plin. *NH* 36, 127: *namque et passim inveniuntur, in Hispania quoque*

near the colony of Ptolemais.”³⁰ In the aetiology of the burnt ceruse, Pliny presumably follows Vitruvius,³¹ who, however, does not name the place of the accident, only Pliny places it in the port of Piraeus.

The Plinian narrative of aetiological stories is characterized by the duality of incident with its story-building role, which functions as a central motif in aetiologies, and the narration referring to oral tradition, in contrast with the localization of the case and referencing the sources. One can understand this paradox if the micronarratives are put back into the structure of which they are components. That is, into the three-fold structure of creation—presentation—usage Pliny employs to describe materials. All of the aetiologies are listed where they belong in the textual structure built by Pliny: in the first part that provides the location.³² Since in the case of burnt ceruse, magnet, glass and Corinthian bronze, anecdotes act as a substitute for factual information due to the lack of an authentic source,³³ Pliny’s efforts were perceptibly aimed at stripping the anecdotes of their essential anecdotal traits in a narrative way. The result of this is the Janus-faced narrative, whose narrator tries to supplement the story with data, which he often introduces with the formula *fertur*, and which he himself classifies as *fama*.

VI Anthropocentric and Anthrozoological Digressions

The aetiological digressions thus play the role of *res* in the three-fold structure of material description, which Pliny uses to indicate factual information.³⁴ The anthropocentric digressions on rulers, statesmen, public celebrities³⁵ and visual artists,³⁶ as well as the anthrozoological digressions³⁷ focusing on the theme of interdependence between man and the living world fit

³⁰ Plin. *NH* 36, 190: *ex ea creditur nasci Belus amnis quinque milium passuum spatio in mare perfluens iuxta Ptolemaidem coloniam.*

³¹ Vitr. *De arch.* 7, 12. 2: *id autem incendio facto ex casu didicerunt homines.* “This fact was accidentally discovered in a conflagration.” (F. Granger)

³² Plin. *NH* 35, 38: “Eretria takes its name from the territory which produces it.” *NH* 35, 39: “According to Juba, sandarach and ochra are both of them productions of the island of Topazus, in the Red Sea; but neither of them are imported to us from that place.” (H. Rackham). The examples could be listed for a long time.

³³ In the context of historiography see SCHWINDT (2021) 35.: “Die anekdotische Geschichtserzählung ist ein Wahrheitskuchen, der eigentlich immer funktioniert, weil Wahrheit immer nur im Moment ihrer plastischen Entfaltung aufgerufen wird. Das geschichtliche Material realisiert und verifiziert sich performativ. Man bemerkt es nicht sogleich, dass man eigentlich immer nur der *ad hoc*-Auffüllung einer Lücke beiwohnt, die man selbst kaum je bemerkt hätte.”

³⁴ I am indebted to Albrecht Locher for the interpretation of what the category of information Pliny calls *res* and *historiae* means in his vocabulary: LOCHER (1986) 20–23.

³⁵ On the portrait of Cicero, Caesar, Pompeius and Augustus in *Natural History*, see DARAB (1995); DARAB (2020) 11–21 and 22–37.

³⁶ See in detail DARAB (2020) 79–119.

³⁷ See in detail DARAB (2020) 22–56.

into the *historiae* category within *Natural History* based on their content. *Historiae*, in Pliny's usage, is the narration of events or incidents related to the topic being discussed, with the name of their sources cited.

Digressions belonging to the category of *historiae* fulfill the role of *exemplum*, well-known from rhetoric, which Quintilian calls the third type of rhetorical proof.³⁸

Potentissimum autem est inter ea quae sunt huius generis, quod proprie vocamus exemplum, id est rei gestae aut ut gestae utilis ad persuadendum id quod intenderis commemoratio.

The most important of proofs of this class is that which is most properly styled example, that is to say the adducing of some past action real or assumed which may serve to persuade the audience of the truth of the point which we are trying to make. (H. E. Butler)

He then distinguishes two ways of citing examples:

*Quaedam autem ex iis quae gesta sunt tota narrabimus.*³⁹

Historical parallels may however sometimes be related in full. (H. E. Butler)

*quaedam significare satis est.*⁴⁰

On the other hand in certain cases it will be sufficient merely to allude to the parallel. (H. E. Butler)

On the presentation of historical examples, he says:⁴¹

Haec ita dicentur prout nota erunt vel utilitas causae aut decor postulabit.

³⁸ Quint *Inst.* 5, 11. 6.

³⁹ Quint. *Inst.* 5, 11. 15.

⁴⁰ Quint. *Inst.* 5, 11. 16.

⁴¹ Quint. *Inst.* 5, 11. 16.

Such parallels will be adduced at greater or less length according as they are familiar or as the interests or adornment of our case may demand. (H. E. Butler)

Pliny applies in practice exactly what Quintilian summarized as theoretical information about the rhetorical form of the *exemplum* just a few years later. Sometimes he presents the stories in their entirety, such as Lysippus' beginning of career,⁴² or even tells a series of stories, as in the short-story of Apelles or Protogenes.⁴³ Sometimes he only refers to certain facts of the *fabula*, such as the beginning of Silanion's self-taught career.⁴⁴ Sometimes he presents the anecdotes as they were well-known (*nota*), which is evidenced by the fact that the story has been preserved by several authors and is essentially the same, as in the case of *Ialysos*.⁴⁵ Still, it happens much more often that Pliny chooses one of the story variants according to the interest of the case (*utilitas causae*), or chooses the presentation of the story according to the interest of the case, as in the Protogenes–Demetrius anecdote.⁴⁶

It is no coincidence that the anecdotes that function as *exemplum*⁴⁷ occur in the greatest number in the anthropological and artistic books of *Natural History*: these books show the most about man. Pliny selected the anecdotes focusing on celebrities and their variants according to his own ambition (*utilitas causae*), and then further shaped them by turning the lives and characters of the celebrities into parables of Roman *mos maiorum*.⁴⁸ Perhaps the most important of the ethical norms conveyed by anthropocentric anecdotes is *consensus*, which is also the absolute norm of the animal world. Wild animals do not attack each other, but neither they attack humans, they only defend themselves. The generous lion does not hurt the begging man,⁴⁹ and catches his attacker, throws him on the ground, but does not kill him.⁵⁰ In a series of anecdotes, Book 8 discusses the parabolical cases where animals and humans help each other.⁵¹ The dolphin narrative⁵² in Book 9 is a remarkable parable of working together. These anecdotes provide the ideal picture of the congruent life of man and nature, as parables of *consensus*, which is fundamental to *natura*'s functioning.

⁴² Plin. *NH* 61.

⁴³ Plin. *NH* 35, 79–97 and 101–106.

⁴⁴ Plin. *NH* 34, 51.

⁴⁵ Plin. *NH* 35, 102–103. See in detail DARAB (2020) 70–75.

⁴⁶ Plin. *NH* 35, 104–105. DARAB (2020) 76–79.

⁴⁷ On the anecdote appearing in the function of the narrative *exemplum*, see WITTCROW 2021. On the relationship between anecdote and *exemplum* in Roman rhetoric theory, see NAAS (2023) 83–87.

⁴⁸ DARAB (2020) 112–118.

⁴⁹ Plin. *NH* 8, 48.

⁵⁰ Plin. *NH* 8, 51.

⁵¹ Plin. *NH* 8, 56–61.

⁵² Plin. *NH* 9, 29–32. Cf. DARAB (2020) 57–69.

VII Mirabilia

A considerable part of the digressions in *Natural History* belongs thematically to the so-called *mirabilia*, which is one of the distinguished categories of Pliny's grouping of information. Mentions or descriptions of fantastic creatures, phenomena and cases can be found in every book of the encyclopedia. Therefore, the presence of *mirabilia* in *Natural History* cannot be interpreted from the perspective of the topic in which they are discussed, but rather, what carries meaning is the textual pattern that their location within the encyclopedia draws. The *mirabilia* is typically associated with regions far from Italy, barely known, and decreases in proportion until it completely disappears as the geographical direction of the narrative approaches the world of civilization and culture, i.e. Italy.⁵³

The narrator attempts to present *mirabilia* in the dynamic of the periphery and the center, but he also strives to fit these wonderful creatures and phenomena into the informative function of the text and the corresponding objective presentation—similarly to the aetiological anecdotes. Pliny therefore often names his sources, such as Megasthenes, Ctesias and the contemporary Mucianus. Naming the sources is supplemented by personal experiences that could be classified as *observationes*, which Pliny saw and heard during his military services in Spain, Africa and Germany, and which he narrates with the authenticity of an eyewitness. Pliny documents his own experience, and enunciates his particular perception of nature, when he writes:

*Nam mihi contuenti semper suasit rerum natura nihil incredibile existimare de ea.*⁵⁴

I have observed Nature she has always induced me to deem no statement about her incredible. (H. Rackham)

However, the substantial presence of *mirabilia* in *Natural History* can be explained not only by Pliny's peculiar view of nature. The emergence and shaping of a new attitude of mind can be observed in the Latin literature during the first century of the Roman Empire.⁵⁵ The nominal form *cura* and above all the adjective *curiosus* were in use, which signifies an intellectual

⁵³ On the *imperium*-thought of *Natural History* see MURPHY 2004, 154–160; GAULY 2019, 34–38.

⁵⁴ Plin. *NH* 11, 6.

⁵⁵ On *curiosus* attitude in this period see KÖVES-ZULAUF (1972) 326–329; NAAS (2002) 262–267; MURPHY (2004) 57–59; HEALY (2005) 65–69; BEAGON (2011) 71.

behavior principally interested in working with a most attentive care and with a desire for comprehensive investigation. Changes in the words' usage can be observed in the works of Cicero,⁵⁶ Seneca,⁵⁷ Pliny the Elder, Tacitus⁵⁸ and Quintilian.⁵⁹ In Cicero's usage, *curiosus* means no more than to gather information in a superficial manner without any sorting, which sets it in an opposition with the desire to acquire real knowledge (*cupiditas scientiae*). Seneca, Tacitus and Quintilian approach the question from various directions, but they all cast an unfavorable eye on the *curiosus* artificer, who—in their interpretation—cannot get rid of the temptation to include in his work of art everything he has read, heard and experienced.

The adjective *curiosus* appears seven times in the 37 books of *Natural History*,⁶⁰ generally meaning: observant, interested, attentive to details and the careful study of a subject. In Pliny's usage, contrary to his contemporaries, *curiosus* stands for a positive attribute. First and foremost, it means the care taken in scientific research, the meticulous scrutiny that reveals and summarises all the knowledge brought to light with infinite diligence. Including what we feel the least appropriate for scientific work. What is beyond knowledge, beyond experience, beyond our norms, what is rationally inexplicable. The world of the miraculous, the seemingly unbelievable, the extraordinary creatures, abilities, phenomena and cases—in other words, the world of *mirabilia*, which is more prominent in the text of *Natural History* than in any other ancient scientific work. The quality of Pliny's curiosity can thus be defined as being on the borderline between curiosity about everything, in the Ciceronian sense, and the scientific research and writing embodied in the works of Seneca and Tacitus. The interest in variety of non-scientific phenomena, including *mirabilia*, has paradoxically opened the way to scientific research. The significance of Pliny's curiosity for the history of sciences lies precisely in the fact that he transferred from the Greeks, together with the sources, the driving force of scientific curiosity into the modern age.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Cic. *Fin.* 5, 48–49.

⁵⁷ Sen. *Brev.* 13.

⁵⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 13, 31.

⁵⁹ Quint. *Inst.* 11, 143.

⁶⁰ *NH* 13, 75; 18, 19; 21, 179; 25, 7; 25, 12; 30, 99; 34, 58.

⁶¹ KÖVES–ZULAUF (1972) 333; HEALY (2005) 70; BEAGON (2011) 86.

VIII Conclusion: Digression as an Epistemological Figure

Pliny's curious attitude, including the miraculous phenomena of nature, is a direct consequence of his particular perception of nature, which considered everything that can be found, experienced or known about it from any source to be a product of *natura*.⁶² The narrative consequence of this approach and his behavior as a researcher is the use of digressions and their pervasive presence in the text of the encyclopedia. The well-known digression from the *ars dicendi* in *Natural History* is not a means of decoration, but an opportunity to include other knowledge that is not too remote from the main topic, but not necessarily related to it either. The content of the digressions can be summed up in what Quintilian writes about *egressus*: it is the glorification of people⁶³ and places,⁶⁴ description of the landscape, narration of historical events or legends.

Anecdotal digressions in *Natural History* are narratives of historical events or legendary occurrences that partially convey information that completes the description of the components, creatures, and phenomena of nature. These micronarratives sometimes act as a substitute for factual information due to the lack of an authentic source (aetiological anecdotes) and sometimes convey aesthetic norms by transforming them into easily accessible stories (artist anecdotes). In both cases, the anecdotal digressions of *Natural History* thus function as an epistemological figure. On the other hand, these micronarratives also convey the norms according to which the components, beings and phenomena of nature can live and function (anthropocentric and anthrozoological anecdotes): *utilitas iuvandi, iuvare mortalem, consensus*. With their function of imparting knowledge and conveying norms, the anecdotal digressions contribute to the realization of the encyclopedia's genre ambition, whose program is condensed into a single sentence in the preface: *rerum natura, hoc est vita, narratur*.⁶⁵

⁶² BEAGON (2011) 84–86.

⁶³ E.g. the encomium of Cicero: *NH* 7, 116–117.

⁶⁴ E.g. laus Italiae: *NH* 37, 201–202.

⁶⁵ *NH* praef. 12.

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