

## BOOK REVIEW

*Pliny's Encyclopedia. The Reception of the Natural History.* By Aude DOODY. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. 194. Hardcover, £58.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-49103-7.

To read this book is to be exposed to scholarly questions few of us consider. Most would agree with the author's statement that "The *Natural History* has perhaps more often been used than read" (40). Scholars who study any aspect of the ancient natural world have routinely dipped into Pliny's treasure chest of facts at one time or another. But few of us have considered questions such as these: "What is an encyclopedia?"; "Did such a genre exist in antiquity?"; "Are Pliny's endless lists random or planned?"

Doody addresses such questions as these and more in her volume. The title is a bit misleading. This reader hoped to find a full tracing of the influence Pliny has exerted on later encyclopedists. Yet mention of Solinus and Isidore or of the medieval explosion of encyclopedic works (e.g. Bartholomew the Englishman, Vincent of Beauvais) is scant and passing (170). Yet readers interested in this line of inquiry can find material for reading in the impressive footnotes and bibliography of Doody's work.

The current volume instead consists of four rather discrete essays loosely joined together. A brief introduction (1–10) lays out the book's underlying aim – to study Pliny's work as an encyclopedia and to study the ways in which the demands of any given time frame affect the manner in which the *Natural History* is perceived and used. Each of the subsequent chapters looks at a different way in which this has happened. The first chapter, "Science and Encyclopedism: the Originality of the *Natural History*" (11–39), reassesses the readiness with which modern scholars call Pliny's work an encyclopedia in the modern sense of the word. His work, she argues, is not a mere collection of random facts. Rather, the facts are juxtaposed and arranged by Pliny to show us that "it is the power and majesty of nature that we are supposed to understand, not the details for their own sake" (25). Moreover, she maintains, the *Natural History* was "designed to entertain as well as instruct" (30). The chapter ends with a brief study of Francis Bacon's attitudes toward Pliny.

Chapter 2 (31–91) is entitled “Diderot’s Pliny and the Politics of the Encyclopedia,” and was this reader’s favorite. In wide-ranging fashion, Doody studies the role of Pliny in ancient education and the concept of *enkyklios paideia*, the relationship of Pliny to the works of Cato, Varro and Celsus, and the geographical lists of Pliny as indicators of that author’s biases and scholarly methodology. It also concludes with a modern instance of reception, this one being the use of Pliny by the great French encyclopedist, Diderot.

Chapter 3, “Finding Facts: the *Summarium* in the Early Printed Editions” (92–131), is an intriguing study of the way early printed editions chose to treat Pliny’s first chapter, in which he lays out the contents of the huge work facing a reader. He does so, he says, so that the ancient reader, much like the modern reader, may skip ahead to the facts and information he or she is seeking. The chapter studies the early editions to show that some felt the *Summarium* was little more than a table of contents and even felt free to break up the contents of the first chapter and use them as chapter headings. Even the way in which the *Summarium* is printed affects the reader’s perception. If printed as continuous prose, it reads as a narrative. If an editor chooses to print it in columns, it resembles a table of contents.

The fourth and last chapter, “Specialist readings: Art and Medicine from the *Natural History*” (132–72), is a close study of how two books have mined the *Natural History* to make thematic collections of excerpts from Pliny. The first is an instructive study of a fourth-century medical collection generally called the *Medicina Plinii* and a later, sixth-century version of this work called the *Physica Plinii*. The reader is given a history of the texts, manuscripts, and the first edition by one Alban Thorer (1489–1550). It is an interesting, if somewhat labored read. The second book is Eugenie Sellers’ *The Elder Pliny’s Chapters on the History of Art* (1896 with subsequent reprintings). This volume is studied for the way the material excerpted and collected reflects the tastes and needs both of the times and of the subject under discussion. As with Thorer, the text is rather dense and in places (155) could have benefited from clearer exposition. The book ends with a two page summation

The breadth of Doody’s scholarship is impressive, as her cited sources range from manuscripts, through *incunabula*, and over centuries of scholarly work in widely diffuse fields. The text is very clean and free of typographical errors. As mentioned, the prose style can be difficult to follow at times, but it is always informative. The steep price of the book and the rather narrow focus of the chapters mean that this book is not a “must have” for the average classicist. But anyone

who has admired Pliny and has spent some time wandering in his hall of wonders will want to read it.

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