

Natural Influences: Structural and Thematic Influences of Imperial Scientific Encyclopedias

The political nature of Pliny's and Seneca's scientific compendia are well-established; less so, the shared humanistic themes and structures. Seneca's prologues show a gradual redirection away from the broader human connections with the universe to individual self-improvement, and Pliny's preface and table of contents place an emphasis on human knowledge and art. The structures of both collections highlight human creative intellectual potential by reflecting the progression of the wider universe, then world, down to individual life forms. Attention to the prologues and general structures in these cases reveals potential influence on the *accessus* prefaces that would become common in medieval European manuscripts. This more structural and thematic influence receives less attention than the content or genre connections observed in Isidore of Seville and his encyclopedic followers.

Seneca the Younger opens *Quaestiones Naturales* with a discussion on the distinctions between branches of philosophy (that which considers the human, and that which considers the divine), and uses that to address nature which can provide insight into both. The use of intellect to expand one's boundaries is both desirable and exclusively human, and might be a pathway to get closer to the divine. The second preface (Book 3) adds an emphasis on age and mentally rising above mortal fears, aided by Nature, while the final preface (4a) highlights the importance of maintaining sense of self. Seneca's habit of inserting poetic citations, and concern for how nature and humanity can both be capable of beauty serves to provide a frame for understanding the collection overall.

Pliny the Elder opens his *Naturalis Historia* with an expected tribute to the Emperor Vaspasian, praising the emperor's poetic ability and referencing Catullus. He also cites Cicero,

poetry first, expressing both humility and patriotism. His invocation of Livy, who wrote the nearest encyclopedic equivalent as a service to the country, not himself, and an emphasis on the importance and style of a good title, like Seneca, provides a frame for the reader that focuses on both the artistic and intellectual capacities of people.

Seneca's multiple prefaces and Pliny's extensive table of contents combined with his preface demonstrate the importance of organization and content while at the same time drawing attention to the novelty of their works and their intentions to benefit humanity. The different approaches, individual by Seneca and national by Pliny, serve to highlight their shared organizational schemes and utilitarian goals. Pliny's emphasis on drawing from key authorial sources, and Seneca's habit of noting his sources of information, but then emphasizing his own commentary go on to demonstrate their mutual commitment to addressing both the knowledge and art humanity is capable of, given that both address the aesthetics of both human creation like poetry as well as natural observation.

As demonstrated by A.J. Minnis, the medieval Western concern with authority and authorship, especially as represented by the Greco-Roman classics and related commentaries, manifested in the rise in framing prologues called *accessus* in medieval copies of quality knowledge (often meaning ancient) which emphasized the style, content, and explication of the text to be read. The intention here is not to claim that the *accessus* is a direct descendant of Pliny and Seneca's scientific collections, but rather to suggest that, given the influences of these early scientific encyclopedias on medieval ideas of scientific knowledge, they might have had some thematic and structural influences. Seneca and Pliny demonstrate elements of humanism that might have been seeds for the rise in prestige of human intellectual and artistic benefit visibly beginning in the Middle Ages.

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