

## “Digging” in Seneca’s *Natural Questions*

This paper argues that in his *Natural Questions* Seneca uses the word *eruere*, “to dig” to exemplify the challenge humans face in rejecting vice and embracing virtue. Used in its literal sense throughout the text, *eruere* feeds avarice whose pursuit of precious metals is immoral and destructive. In its metaphorical sense on the other hand, *eruere* denotes the discovery of eternal truths about the universe through contemplation of nature, the very purpose of the *Natural Questions*. Much attention has been paid to man’s misuse of nature’s gifts in the *Natural Questions*, such as mirrors or the wind (Berno (2003) on Hostius Quadra’s misuse of mirrors and Williams (2012) 207ff. on conquerors’ exploitation of the winds). But this paper shows that Seneca embeds this idea of the double-edged sword of man’s exploration of nature in his very word choice, where a single word both positively sums up what Seneca attempts to do in the *Natural Questions* and exemplifies all that is wrong and misguided about mankind.

Appearing only nine times in the *Natural Questions*, *eruere* appears frequently in programmatic passages. In what is quite likely the opening sentence of the work (Codoñer Merino [1979], Hine [1981]), Seneca characterizes his Stoic, scientific study of meteorology by using the metaphor of digging (*mundum circumire constitui et causas secretaque eius eruere atque aliis noscenda proderet*). He employs this same metaphor once more later in the work (7.30.2) when he insists that one should not be surprised that scientific facts take generations to dig up since they are buried deeply (*nec miremur tam tarde erui quam tam alte iacent*). Originally meaning to dig up/out using physical force (eg. Cato *Agr.* 38.2 or Varro *Ling.* 137.1), *eruere* is adopted by authors and thinkers to mean “to discover by inquiry” (eg. Cic. *De or.* 2.175). Alongside the two programmatic uses of the word’s figurative sense, Seneca employs the non-metaphorical meaning in two passages concerned with mining. First, in the final chapter

of Book 3 (3.30.2) in the context of a discussion of the earth's capacity to destroy humanity by means of a flood, he notes that whenever *avaritia* causes men to penetrate deeply into the earth, their digging always discovers water. The second and fuller exploration of the immorality and dangers of digging comes in Book 5 (5.15) as part of a historical exemplum that shows to the delight of Seneca that vice is not a contemporary invention but has dogged man for centuries. Philip of Macedon ordered an old mine to be explored to see if *vetus avaritia* had left anything behind for posterity. Mining has physical effects on man according to Seneca: it causes him to leave behind the light of day (a tergo lucem relinquere) and drives him, who by nature is upright and gazes at the heavens, downward (hominem ad sidera erectum incurvavit). Digging into the earth in search of precious metals symbolizes a kind of regression of man, first to animal and then past that to no life at all, precisely the opposite activity to Seneca's project of turning inward to gain knowledge of the universe.

Mining is a wrong-headed and literal acting out of the purpose of Seneca's *Natural Questions*, of digging out the secrets and causes of the world. Seneca uses forms of the verb *eruere* as a way to exemplify a fundamental tension for humanity. Actual physical digging causes misguided man to deny his god-like nature by bending down and tunneling into the earth in search of physical materials that will only reinforce his viciousness. Metaphorical digging however internalizes the vision of man and enables him to pursue the cosmic viewpoint that raises him up above trivial human matters (Williams (2012)). This tension, however, with the double duty to which Seneca puts *eruere* is not wholly resolved. It is a word whose root, as seen in *ruina* – a connection highlighted in the digression on Philip at 5.15 – is violent and dangerous. It must be also offered that Seneca is revealing a danger, unholy and transgressive, even in his metaphorical digging into nature.

Berno, F.R. (2003) *Lo specchio, il vizio e la virtù: studio sulle Naturales Quaestiones di Seneca*.

Bologna.

Codoñer Merino, C. ed. (1979) *L. Annaei Senecae Naturales Quaestiones*. 2 vols.

Madrid.

Gauly, B.W. (2004) *Senecas Naturales Quaestiones: Naturphilosophie für die*

*römische Kaiserzeit*. Munich.

Hine, H. (1981) *An Edition with Commentary of Seneca, Natural Questions, Book Two*.

New York.

----- (2006) "Rome, the Cosmos, and the Emperor in Seneca's 'Natural

Questions'". JRS 96, 42-72.

Inwood, B. (2005) "God and Human Knowledge in Seneca's *Natural Questions*"

in *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*. Oxford.

Williams, G. (2012) *The Cosmic Viewpoint: A Study of Seneca's Natural Questions*.

Oxford.