

## *Natura* and the Senses in Pliny's *Natural History*

Over the past decade, the topic of the senses in antiquity has received increasing attention (<https://sensorystudiesinantiquity.com/tag/publications/>). The present paper contributes to this discussion by examining the role of the senses in the broadly animistic mindset of Pliny's *Natural History* (*NH*). Pliny, I argue, presents sensory awareness as a spiritual activity. He guides readers to experience the numinous world (*mundum...numen esse*, *NH* 2.1) by paying attention to their senses. His focus on tactility, olfaction, taste, and hearing in human and non-human animals is essential to his exposition of nature's divinity. His approach enhances the Stoic ethics of *contemplatio naturae*, i.e. the physical and mental visualization of the divine presence.

Pliny reminds his audience that several encounters with the divine are mediated by the body: knees, right hand, chin, and ear enable ritual behaviors (*genibus quaedam et religio inest...inest et aliis partibus quaedam religio*, 11.250). In discussing botanical remedies, he urges his audience to recognize the *providentiam naturae* (22.16) in the taste, smell, and texture of plants: some are simultaneously attractive, tasty, and wholesome (*visuque...deliciis auxilia*, 22.16); others are bristly and rough to the touch (*aspectu hispidas, tactu truces*, 22. 17). As they project these sensations on themselves, readers also hear the voice of *natura* accounting for her herbal creativity (*voce...exaudire videamur*, 22.17). Discussion of insects also begins with the sensorial, this time from a non-human perspective: 'where did *natura* find room for so many senses in the tiny mosquito?' Pliny wonders (*ubi tot sensus collocavit in culice?...ubi visum?...ubi gustatum...ubi odoratum?* 11.2-3). Elsewhere, he declares that while man surpasses all animals in acuity of taste and touch, he is outdone in the other senses by many creatures (*ex sensibus ante cetera homini tactus, dein gustatus; reliquis superatur a multis*, 10.88). The

distribution of sense capabilities across species challenges anthropocentric supremacy and evinces the *naturae varietas* (10.91).

In sum, for Pliny, the human-divine relation is not attainable by pious reflection alone, but through immersion in the materiality of *natura*. His materialistic approach draws from, but goes beyond, the Stoic ethics of *contemplatio naturae*. Rather than merely see the deity in their mind, Pliny's readers are invited to experience all their senses as spiritual realities and to find metaphysical and ethical meaning in them.

#### Bibliography

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