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Spectant Victores Ruinam Naturae: the Morality of Farming and Mining in Pliny's Natural History

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Spectant Victores Ruinam Naturae
the Morality of Farming and Mining in
Pliny's *Natural History*

ResMA Thesis Classics and Ancient Civilizations (Classics)

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Introduction

Mother Earth

In 2009, the UN General Assembly designated April 22 as International Mother Earth Day. In the resolution the assembly acknowledges that it is necessary to promote harmony with nature and the Earth in order to achieve a just balance among the economic, social, and environmental needs of present and future generations. Mother Earth, so recognizes the assembly, is a common expression for planet earth in a number of countries and regions. The expression reflects the interdependence that exists among human beings, other living species and the planet we all inhabit.¹ I would suggest, however, that ‘interdependence’ does not completely cover the meaning of ‘mother’ as a personification of the earth. The term ‘mother’ implies a connection between humanity and the earth that is intimate to a familial degree. The resolution could also have added that the expression has a strong presence in literature throughout history. Pliny, for example, in his *Historia Naturalis* (*HN*), makes persistent use of the metaphor. Let us take a chapter from his second book as an example (*HN* 2.154):

Sequitur terra, cui uni rerum naturae partium eximia propter merita cognomen indidimus maternae venerationis. Sic hominum illa ut caelum dei, quae nos nascentes excipit, natos alit, semelque editos sustinet semper, novissime complexa gremio iam a reliqua natura abdicatos tum maxime ut mater operiens.

Next comes the earth, to whom as the only part of nature, because of her extraordinary merits, we have given a name of maternal veneration. Mankind has her in the way that god has the sky. She receives us when we are born, feeds us after we are born, and sustains us always once begotten, and at last she embraces us in her bosom when we are already rejected by the rest of nature and then especially, she covers us as a mother.²

In the second book Pliny gives an account of the world (*mundus*) and its elements (e.g. the moon, the sun, the weather). In his introduction to the earth, Pliny takes the metaphor to its extreme. The earth gives birth, nurtures, and takes care of us in times of hardship, in other words, according to Pliny, she acts like a mother to mankind. In this thesis I aim to examine human-nature interactions in the *HN* and to discuss how and why Pliny personifies nature.

As Lakoff and Johnson showed in *Metaphors We Live By*, such personifications allow us “to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities.”³ Calling the earth ‘mother’ allows us to make sense of the world in terms “that we can understand on the basis of our own motivations, goals, actions, and characteristics.” Thus, viewing the earth in human terms “has an explanatory power of the

¹ General Assembly resolution 63/278. *International Mother Earth Day*, A/RES/63/278 (1 May 2009). Available from undocs.org/en/A/RES/63/278. The writing of this thesis has been made possible by a research grant from the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome, which included a stay at the institute, the use of their library and supervision by Dr. S.T.M. de Beer.

² All translations are my own.

³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 33.

only sort that makes sense to most people.”⁴ What, then, are Pliny and the UN trying to explain in human terms exactly by calling the earth ‘mother’? The intentions of the UN are best explained in their own words: “Mother Earth is clearly urging a call to action. Nature is suffering.”⁵ They try to appeal to our familial affections to argue that we should spring into action against climate change and pollution. These affections are described in terms that we understand from our everyday lives. While we might not be impressed by the problems of something as abstract as ‘nature’, we cannot, of course, accept the suffering of our own mother. Especially if her suffering is our own fault.

Pliny is not the first to compare the earth to a mother. Hesiod uses the trope in his *Works and Days*, saying that “earth, mother of all, produces various fruits” (Γῆ πάντων μήτηρ καρπὸν σύμμικτον ἐνείκη, *Op.* 563). Furthermore, in his *Theogony*, he presents her as the divine mother figure ‘Gaia’, being both the habitat of all life and a primordial goddess.⁶ Christopher Schliephake explains that “Gaia is both person as well as abstraction, a way to reflect on genealogy and the force of natural matter. She cannot be equated with a naturalistic explanation of natural phenomena but, rather, must be seen as part of a network where human transgression entails punishment by the gods.”⁷ Pliny also calls nature divine: “It is proper that the world is believed to be a divinity [...] having everything without and within in her embrace, and at the same time the work of nature and nature herself” (*mundum [...] numen esse credi par est [...] extra intra cuncta complexus in se, idemque rerum naturae opus et rerum ipsa natura*, *HN* 2.1). Pliny, however, is more interested in the abstraction of nature and the earth with which to present his network of interactions between humans and natural phenomena. His use of the ‘Mother Earth’ trope in books on agriculture, mining and quarrying comes closer to the rhetoric of the UN instead. In book 33, on metals, Pliny argues that the practice of mining might have severe consequences for mankind (*HN* 33.1-2):

Persequimur omnes eius fibras vivimusque super excavatam, mirantes dehiscere aliquando aut intremescere illam, ceu vero non hoc indignatione sacrae parentis exprimi possit. Imus in viscera et in sede manium opes quaerimus, tamquam parum benigna fertilique qua calcatur.

We follow all her entrails, and we live above her excavated hollows, being astonished that she sometimes splits open or begins to tremble, as if in truth this could not be expressed by the indignation of our sacred parent. We go into her bowels and in the dwelling of the spirits of the departed we seek riches, like the place where we walk is not bounteous or fertile enough.

In this passage, Pliny could not have voiced ‘Mother Earth’s call to action’ in clearer terms. Mankind disembowels its ‘sacred parent’ out of greed for riches and in response she shows her

⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, 34.

⁵ United Nations. “International Mother Earth Day 22 April.” Retrieved February 24, 2023 from <https://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>.

⁶ Christopher Schliephake, *The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 54.

⁷ Schliephake, *The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World*, 54.

indignation in the form of a natural disaster. This way, Pliny similarly appeals to our familial affections to argue against mankind's greed for the earth's riches.⁸ However, there is a difference in the way in which Pliny and the UN apply this rhetorical strategy. Whereas the UN depict the earth as a victim of the actions of humanity, Pliny explicitly defines the earth as an actor, capable of defending itself against violence and injustice. More precisely, he defines the earth as a *moral* actor that reacts to the immoral transgressions of mankind stemming from excessive greed.

This thesis examines Pliny's mother nature trope in passages on agriculture, mining and quarrying in the *HN*. As the example from book 33 shows, interactions between nature and mankind seem to be most explicit in these passages. Pliny gives the earth a voice, but to what purpose? In order to answer this question, I aim to discuss the way in which Pliny represents the earth in relation to humanity. The first chapter is dedicated to earth in an agricultural context as the caretaker or mother of mankind. I have given one example of the earth's caring motherhood already. The second chapter is dedicated to human transgressions of the boundaries of nature. Here I aim to argue that the principles of care which I discussed in the first chapter, are perverted in the context of mining. In the third chapter I discuss how Pliny promotes Roman control over nature. I argue that Pliny rewrites nature's care for the benefit of the Roman empire. For these discussions I aim to close read books on the earth (book 2 in particular), on farming (17 and 18 on trees and grain) and on mining (33, 34, 36, 37 on metals and precious stones). Before moving on to these discussions, however, Pliny's basic assumptions on the relationship between humans and nature need to be examined. First, I aim to discuss some of the programmatic elements of the *HN*'s preface and, second, previous research on Pliny's thought on nature. Third, I aim to take a brief look at modern environmental thinkers that can help us define Pliny's approach to nature.

Pliny's Preface

In the preface to the *HN*, Pliny dedicates his work to the future emperor Titus. He presents its theme as follows: "I have dedicated to you these little books of lighter care: they set forth a barren subject, the nature of things, that is life" (*levioris operae hos tibi dedicavi libellos: [...] Sterilis materia, rerum natura, hoc est vita, narratur, Pref. 12-13*). His words are as concise as they are vague. The meaning of both *sterilis* and *rerum natura* needs to be addressed. First, his subject is neither barren in the literal nor in the unimaginative sense. As pointed out above, he finds enough reason in his work to point out the fertility of nature and to start insightful moralistic digressions on human-nature interactions. Nicholas Howe duly remarks that "this comment comes as something of a shock, for if anyone writes of the marvellous or the unusual

⁸ With this passage in mind Wallace-Hadrill confesses that it is tempting to represent Pliny as a sort of proto-environmentalist: "certainly there is at points an unmistakably green tinge to his ideas." I endorse this way of viewing the work of Pliny, but it is important to note that Pliny's starting point for environmental thinking is much different from ours. Wallace-Hadrill himself argues that his starting point is the abuse of natural resources for luxury (see also chapter 2). I argue that the idea of empire is another starting point for Pliny to think about human-nature interactions. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Pliny the Elder and Man's Unnatural History." *Greece & Rome* 37 no.1 (1990): 85-86.

in nature, it is Pliny.”⁹ Neither is the *materia* of his work *sterilis* in the ‘unproductive’ sense. The ‘nature of things’ has given many authors before Pliny plenty of material to work with. He takes great care to point out that he collected facts from 2000 volumes by 100 select authors in his 36 volumes (*Pref.* 17). This is the opposite from what the reader would expect from a *libellus* or *levior opera* that treats *sterilis materia*.

The epithets that Pliny adds to his subject are perhaps best understood from the opening of his preface. In the opening he presents his books as a work of ‘lighter care’ too. He quotes lines 3-4 from Catullus’ dedicatory poem: “Because you used to think that my trifles were worth something” (*namque tu solebas / nugae esse aliquid meas putare, Pref.* 1).¹⁰ Many scholars have interpreted Pliny’s quotation as programmatic irony. He teases the reader with the possibility that his work may be ‘trifling’, but actually asserts the primacy of prose writers, such as himself, at the expense of poets, such as Catullus. After all, any serious reader would be able to read through this irony.¹¹ In fact, Catullus himself uses this rhetorical trick in his dedication to Cornelius Nepos.¹² He contrasts the *nugae* of his own fine little book, polished with dry (*aridus*) pumice (1.1-2),¹³ to the laborious and learned universal history of his friend who dared “to set forth all of time in three papyri / learned, by Jove, and laboriously wrought” (*omne aevum tribus explicare chartis / doctis, Iuppiter, et laboriosis, 1.6-7*). This way, previous scholarship has argued that it makes sense to understand Pliny’s quotation from Catullus as programmatic irony. He aims to create a tension between his own ‘big book’ and Catullus’ ‘small book’. Pliny’s belittling of his own work as ‘a booklet’, ‘light’ and ‘barren’ helps to create this tension.

However, a more serious reading of the *HN*’s Catullan framing might explain why Pliny uses these words in particular to define the subject of his work. Pliny consistently talks about his work in terms that are taken from the first four lines of Catullus’ dedicatory poem. He refers to them as ‘little books’, and, by synonymy, as ‘trifles’, a ‘novelty’ and ‘dry’.¹⁴ In this sense,

⁹ Nicholas Phillis Howe, “In Defense of the Encyclopedic Mode: on Pliny’s “Preface” to the “Natural History.”” *Latomus* 44 no.3 (1985): 573.

¹⁰ The attentive reader might have noticed that this is a misquotation. The actual lines are *namque tu solebas / meas esse aliquid putare nugae* (Catull. 1.3-4). See Howe, “In Defense of the Encyclopedic Mode,” 567-568 on Pliny’s misquotation. Also compare the preface to Diodorus Siculus’ *Library* (1.1.2) in which he quotes the third line of the *Odyssey*. Homer seems to be a much more suitable reference than Catullus for a universal history. Perhaps Pliny is playing with these conventions, since he makes clear that he has read and admires Diodorus’ work (*Pref.* 25).

¹¹ Roy K. Gibson, “Elder and Better: The *Naturalis Historia* and the Letters of the Younger Pliny,” in *Pliny the Elder Themes and Contexts*, ed. Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 192. Ruth Morello, “Pliny and the Encyclopaedic Addressee,” in *Pliny the Elder Themes and Contexts*, ed. Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 148-149. Howe, “In Defense of the Encyclopedic Mode,” 569. König’s statement that Pliny teases the reader with trifles but soon afterwards makes clear “that he values ‘useful’ texts over ‘entertaining’ ones” comes down to the same idea. With his reference to Catullus Pliny contrasts different types of texts with different aims. Alice König, “Knowledge and Power in Frontinus’ On Aqueducts,” in *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire*, ed. Jason König and Tim Whitmarsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 197-198. See also Richard Saller, *Pliny’s Roman Economy: Natural History, Innovation, and Growth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 34ff. on Pliny’s claim of the usefulness of his prose.

¹² Howe, “In Defense of the Encyclopedic Mode,” 567.

¹³ *Lepidum novum libellum / arido modo pumice expoliturum*.

¹⁴ Cf. *libelli* (*Pref.* 12, 26, 28) and *libellum* (Catull. 1.1); *muginamur* (*Pref.* 18) and *nugae* (Catull. 1.4); *novicium* (*Pref.* 1) and *novum* (Catull. 1.1); *sterilis* (*Pref.* 12) and *arido* (Catull. 1.2). The only Catullan element that does not seem to be represented is the smooth finish or ‘polish’ (*expolitus*) of his book. Pliny acknowledges this when he mentions Greek artists who inscribe their works with provisional titles “as if their art is always unfinished and incomplete” (*tamquam inchoata semper arte et imperfecta, Pref.* 26). This seems to be an unavoidable aspect of

sterilis, like *aridus*, might denote the avoidance of unnecessary ornament or any other excess and error.¹⁵ The programmatic metapoetry of Catullus' first poem triggers the reader, especially someone learned like the future emperor, to read the preface as a celebration of Pliny's accomplishment as a writer of universal histories. Pliny managed to complete his work in as little space as possible (*libellus*) and without abundance or error (*sterilis*). In other words, he managed to make light work (*levis*) of a heavy subject. The downplaying of the dimensions of his own work, therefore, betrays a deliberate rhetorical strategy, other than irony. Moreover, through Catullus' praise of Cornelius Nepos, Pliny takes advantage of the success of his predecessor. Writing a universal history in the space of only three scrolls is a true accomplishment for any collector of knowledge. The same is true for Pliny's comprising of the knowledge of the whole known natural world in 37 books.¹⁶

Pliny's Cultural History

The *materia* of Pliny's 37 books is *rerum natura*, which he defines as a rather enigmatic *vita*. The reader of the *HN* might have trouble interpreting Pliny's definition: whose life takes centre stage, nature or mankind? Undoubtedly the work of Mary Beagon should be the basis for any discussion on the thought of Pliny the Elder. Her research output on Pliny consists of a monograph (1992), a commentary on book 7 (2007) and 8 articles and book-chapters. In her 2007 commentary *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal*, she shows that Pliny takes as his framework Aristotle's *scala naturae*, the hierarchical classification of the parts of nature based on their degree of possession of specific powers. After a description of the world and its elements (book 2) and its geographical divisions (books 3-6), he climbs down the ladder from humans at the top (book 7) to other animals (books 8-11) and from animals to plants (books 12-27) and finally minerals (books 33-37).¹⁷ According to Beagon, Pliny's statement that 'nature is life' is an indication of the vision of nature which he develops in the following 37 books: "His nature is not a scientific entity, but the theatre of human life in which the focus is human interaction with nature."¹⁸ Thus, Beagon's answer to whose life takes centre stage in the *HN* is unequivocally that of mankind. For example, she notes that Pliny does not merely provide lists of species in his books of plants, but primarily describes their usefulness to mankind in

the type of work Pliny is writing, because new information might always be stored in it: "I confess openly that many things can be added to my work" (*ego plane meis adici posse multa confiteor*, Pref. 28).

¹⁵ For this definition of *aridus* in Catullus see William W. Batstone, "Dry Pumice and the Programmatic Language of Catullus 1," *Classical Philology* 93 no. 2 (1998): 132. Howe also notes that Pliny upholds a philosophical and rhetorical strategy of simplicity. His work is *sterilis* in the sense that it does not contain moralistic or stylistic digressions. Howe, "In Defense of the Encyclopedic Mode," 573. See also Wallace-Hadrill, *Pliny the Elder and Man's Unnatural History*, 82: "digressions, speeches, and dramatic turns of fortune, the conventional topoi of the historian, have no place here."

¹⁶ The analysis of Pliny's use of Catullan programmatic metapoetry, I also use in a paper I wrote for the Common Course: Libraries and Archives in the Ancient World with Dr. C.H. Pieper.

¹⁷ Mary Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal: Natural History: Book 7* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20-21. On the *scala naturae* see also Catherine Osborne, *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers: Humanity and the Humane in Ancient Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 98-132. According to Osborne, Aristotle does not say that psychological complexity is a mark of human superiority and therefore that humans are at the top of the hierarchy of nature. Instead, Aristotle orders nature in terms of distribution of the functions of the soul, rather than honour. Nonetheless, Pliny organizes his book according to Aristotle's order of nature.

¹⁸ Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal*, 21.

medicine, agriculture, and horticulture. Furthermore, in his books on minerals he incorporates many passages on their use in painting, sculpture, and architecture. In short, as Beagon would argue, “in the *HN*, nature meets culture and is indistinguishable from it.”¹⁹

In this way, Beagon shows that Pliny intends to educate his readers for everyday life by examining all aspects of the world around them. Pliny is not so much interested in nature outside of her interactions with human beings. He studies the natural world as it is viewed and used by mankind.²⁰ Beagon’s observations are perfectly illustrated by passages in which Pliny describes places in which the benefits of nature are not so readily available to mankind. In book 16, on forest trees, he announces that he is about to embark on a discussion of acorn-bearing trees “if not a sense of wonder obtained by habit compelled me to first ask what and how the life of those living without any trees or shrubs would be” (*ni praeverti cogeret admiratio usu conperta, quatenam qualisque esset vita sine arbore ulla, sine frutice viventium*, *HN* 16.1). At this point, he stops his description of forest trees to briefly reflect on the *usefulness* of nature instead. In a striking passage he mentions the Chauci on the coast of the North Sea, who seem to be living in a constant battle against the tides (*HN* 16.3):

Vasto ibi meatu bis dierum noctiumque singularum intervallis effusus in inmensum agitur oceanus, operiens aeternam rerum naturae controversiam dubiamque terrae an partem maris. Illic, misera gens, tumulos optinent altos aut tribunalia extracta manibus ad experimenta altissimi aestus, casis ita inpositis, navigantibus similes cum integant aquae circumdata, naufragis vero cum recesserint, fugientesque cum mari pisces circa tuguria venantur.

There twice in intervals of every day and night the ocean is swept over an immense area with a vast motion, covering up the endless controversy of nature, whether the undecided area is part of the earth or of the sea. In that place [the Chauci], a miserable people, occupy high mounds or platforms constructed by hand according to the highest tide they have experienced. Their huts are placed on top in such a way that they resemble sailors when the waters cover the surrounding lands but shipwrecked when the tide has retired, and around their cottages they chase the fish fleeing with the sea.

In this passage, Pliny clearly implies that a life without trees or shrubs would be miserable and difficult. The Chauci, Pliny wonders, have settled in a place that is not benign to mankind; they have settled in a place over which nature lacks control.²¹ Pliny shows that such a place, being deprived of the benefits of nature, essentially lacks culture as well. The Chauci do not keep herds or drink milk like the neighbouring tribes (*non pecudem his habere, non lacte ali ut*

¹⁹ Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal*, 21. Here, Beagon uses culture in a rather general sense, i.e., anything made or organised by humanity that transcends the bare necessities of survival. For example, in this sense, the achievements of the Greeks and Romans in art and organisation greatly contrast the means of the Chauci in *HN* 16.3. I will discuss this passage in the next paragraph.

²⁰ Mary Beagon, *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 13. See also Wallace-Hadrill, *Pliny the Elder and Man’s Unnatural History*, 83: “That is to say, the whole natural world is there to serve man; our only job is to try to discover the beneficial purpose for which each thing has been created.”

²¹ See also chapter 2 where I discuss Pliny’s statement that the earth is the only element that is never angry with mankind (cf. *HN* 2.154).

finitimis, HN 16.3), but warm their food and bodies with dry scooped-up mud (*captumque manibus lutum*, HN 16.4) and have to make do with rainwater as their only drink (*potus non nisi ex imbre*, HN 16.4). Pliny's observations seem to confirm the overarching idea of the HN that nature and culture go hand in hand. Thus, the Chauci, who live on the edge of nature, are incapable of developing culture themselves.

In a 2007 article Beagon notes that "the cultural chaos of the edges [of the world] is matched by chaos in nature itself."²² She draws this conclusion from a passage which neatly summarises the connection between nature and culture in the HN (HN 2.190):

Medio vero terrae salubri utrimque mixtura fertiles ad omnia tractus, modicos corporum habitus magna et in colore temperie, ritus molles, sensus liquidos, ingenia fecunda totiusque naturae capacis, isdem imperia, quae numquam extimis gentibus fuerint, sicut ne illae quidem his paruerint avolsae ac pro immanitate naturae urgentis illas solitariae.

But in the middle region of the earth, with a healthy mixture of both sides, there are tracts of land fertile for all things. The people are moderate in body-size and have a proper mixture of colour even in their complexions, their customs are pleasant, their senses clear, their intellects fruitful and able to embrace the whole of nature. They have empires, which the people on the outsides never had, as they have never submitted to them, because they are separated and solitary on account of the savageness of the nature that oppresses them.

Beagon observes that, in Pliny's worldview, the uncivilized nature of the people on the outer edges of the earth is directly connected to the savagery of nature in those regions. In contrast, the central regions with their harmonious elements host a people that are organised, intelligent and whose minds are able to understand nature. In the words of Beagon, they "mirror microcosmically nature's ideal state physically and mentally."²³ Pliny's Chauci obviously do not possess such a deeper understanding of nature since they do not live in a region that reflects nature on a microcosmic level. Pliny concludes his observations of the Chauci by saying that "these are the people that say that they are slaves if they would be conquered by the Roman people today! Surely this is the case: fortune spares many as a punishment" (*hae gentes, si vincantur hodie a populo Romano, servire se dicunt! Ita est profecto: multis fortuna parcit in poenam*, HN 16.4). In this concluding remark, Pliny makes clear that he has observed a people that is oppressed by the non-harmonious kind of nature. The Chauci do not receive her benefits but rather slave away at the whims of the tides. The Romans, on the other hand, do benefit from the harmony of nature and, because they mirror and understand her ideal state, live much easier lives.²⁴ In short, as Beagon already anticipated in her monograph, Pliny argues that to have a proper understanding of nature is to have culture; to have culture is to have a proper understanding

²² Mary Beagon, "Situating Nature's Wonders in Pliny's "Natural History"," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement* 100 (2007): 22.

²³ Beagon, "Situating Nature's Wonders," 22. See chapter three on Rome as a microcosm of nature.

²⁴ The idea that the Chauci chose the wrong place to live fits an adage by Columella (1.3) that Pliny quotes in HN 18.28: "Bad is the land with which the master struggles." (*Malus est ager cum quo dominus luctatur*). The Chauci struggle very much with their land, therefore they live on bad land.

of nature.²⁵ All the more, this demonstrates that he is not so much interested in nature from a scientific perspective, but from a cultural and, as a consequence, *moral* perspective.

The centrality of humanity in Pliny's work is heavily influenced by the ideas of the Stoa, as Beagon shows. According to Beagon, Stoic doctrine was becoming increasingly preoccupied with human issues by Pliny's day.²⁶ Seneca's *Quaestiones Naturales* already express these preoccupations by focussing on a human being's place and standing within the world.²⁷ He argues, for example, that the divinity of the mind is proven because it searches the heavens for similarly divine things. He says: "as a curious spectator [the mind] examines individual things and investigates them. Why would he not investigate? He knows that these things pertain to himself" (*curiosus spectator excutit singula et quaerit. Quidni quaerat? Scit illa ad se pertinere, QNat. 1. Praef. 12*). The 'divine things' Seneca refers to here are, among others, the rising and setting of the stars and the diverse orbits of bodies. Pliny discusses these same things at the beginning of his own work. This Stoic doctrine, therefore, demonstrates Pliny's approach to writing a natural history: the natural world is only interesting in so far as it pertains to human beings. The Stoic view that the world was not only divine, but also rational and intelligent, further confirms this approach.²⁸ If nature's actions and interactions are inherently rational, they are best understood through the rationality of human beings. Beagon adds that Pliny expresses the centrality of man in the recurring theme of nature's providence towards humanity. This providence is closely linked with the divine mind of nature as the guiding force.²⁹ In this way, Pliny not only decentralizes nature in favour of humanity, as Beagon shows, but he also constructs it to *be* humanlike. His use of the 'Mother Earth' trope illustrates this approach to constructing nature in the *HN*.

Pliny as a Proto-Environmentalist?

In his seminal article *Pliny the Elder and Man's Unnatural History* (1990) Andrew Wallace-Hadrill aims to redeem Pliny from the critique that his work is incoherent.³⁰ He argues that

²⁵ Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal*, 21. Beagon's phrasing is not quite precise enough, however, since nature and culture are in fact distinguishable. The passage on the Chauci shows that culture and a proper *understanding of nature* are indistinguishable, but that nature still exists without culture. Compare Pliny's anecdote on a horse-painting competition (*HN* 35.95): the horse-painter Apelles appealed to horses themselves to judge his work and that of his competitors. The horses neighed only at Apelles' painting, and they did so on subsequent occasions "so that this was proof of his skill" (*ut experimentum artis illud ostentaretur*). Whether believable or not, the moral of the story here is that Apelles' understanding of nature gives him the edge over his competitors. See also Sorchá Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture: Art and Empire in the Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 106ff. She shows that in such examples, the natural world becomes the supreme arbiter of the quality of an artist's work. Later she discusses the idea that artists provoke nature and try to improve on her, showing a precarious balance in human-nature interactions.

²⁶ Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 27. Wallace-Hadrill, *Pliny the Elder and Man's Unnatural History*, 84: "Philosophically, Pliny's science is squarely based on the sort of Stoic ideas fashionable in Rome at this period, and particularly associated with Posidonius."

²⁷ Vogt, Katja. "Seneca." January 15, 2020. Retrieved April 26, 2023 from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/seneca/#PhyThe>

²⁸ Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 33.

²⁹ Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 37.

³⁰ For the supposed incoherence in Pliny's style see Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa* (B.G. Teubner: Leipzig, 1915), 314 ("Sein Werk gehört, stilistisch betrachtet, zu den schlechtesten, die wir haben.") and Frank Goodyear, *Cambridge History of Latin Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 671 ("Instead of adopting the plain and sober style appropriate to his theme, he succumbs to lust for embellishment."). Especially

Pliny's subject is undoubtedly nature, but nature in, or rather, *as* a context to the human world: "the natural world stands in contrast to and in relationship with the human world. The history of Nature is thus simultaneously a history of Culture. The Natural History of the earth is by inversion the Unnatural History of Man."³¹ Pliny unveils his particular approach especially in passages which reflect on the relationship between nature and the human world.³² According to Wallace-Hadrill, it is tempting to see these reflective passages as an example of proto-environmentalism. He argues that environmentalism is a useful analogy, since "it serves to remind us that the issue of man's relationship with nature is one which may properly engage a scientist, and which may indeed fuel some of the passion behind his work." Since these environmentalist passages are ubiquitous in Pliny's work, they deserve further discussion. Pliny's passion for his work alone does not satisfy the environmentalist analogy, because it does not explain how he approaches the relationship between humans and nature.

More recently, in an article from 2021 on marine folklore in the *HN*, Ryan Denson took the environmentalist reading one step further into the realm of ecocriticism.³³ He argues that Pliny's Stoic conception of nature and his moralising views constitute a post-anthropocentric view in which the centrality of humans in relation to nature is displaced. According to Denson, Pliny rearranges the traditional attributes of divinity so that divine elements are attributed entirely to nature itself. Everything else becomes a creation of that divine nature. He removes the anthropomorphic elements from traditionally divine sea creatures, such as Tritons and Nereids, and gives these creatures back to nature.³⁴ As Beagon and Wallace-Hadrill have shown, however, the framework for Pliny's work is clearly anthropocentric. Pliny is interested in nature in so far as it is used by mankind. In his book on sea creatures (*HN* 9) he frequently discusses their relationship with humans or how they are used.³⁵ Moreover, although Pliny might 'naturalise' traditionally divine and anthropomorphic creatures, he anthropomorphises nature as a whole by calling it 'mother' and giving it a body and emotions.³⁶ Thus, Denson's ecocritical reading no longer works if Pliny displaces his anthropocentrism from marine examples to the larger framework of the *HN*.

The ecocritical reading might, however, prove useful in explaining how Pliny goes about as a proto-environmental thinker. Iovino and Oppermann argue that one of the aims of

the last comment seems rather gratuitous. If Pliny's encyclopedia is to be considered the first of its kind, his style is, of course, as appropriate to his theme as he sees fit. Or perhaps Goodyear missed the irony in Pliny's own comment on the 'sterility' of his subject.

³¹ Wallace-Hadrill, *Pliny the Elder and Man's Unnatural History*, 81. This idea is, of course, very similar to the ideas Beagon presented two years later in her 1992 monograph. Wallace-Hadrill draws on Beagon's doctoral thesis from 1986 that formed the basis for her monograph.

³² Examples of such passages are Pliny's comments on mother earth (*HN* 2.154), on people living without trees (*HN* 16.1) and on the 'indignation of our sacred parent' towards mining (*HN* 33.1-2), all of which I quoted earlier. In *HN* 16.1 he states himself that these digressions are part of his 'sense of wonder obtained by habit'. If we read Wallace-Hadrill's passion as 'eagerness to pursue certain topics', we may very much read these moments of wonder as fuelling the passion behind his work.

³³ Denson is particularly interested in how sea creatures are represented in the *HN*, but his conclusions are equally applicable to the land.

³⁴ Pliny's account of the Nereids, for example, stand in contrast to the traditional depictions of these beings as the daughters of Nereus. He says that their bodies are rough with scales even where they look like humans (*HN* 9.4). This way, they appear to be just another scaly marine animal. Ryan Denson, "Divine Nature and the Natural Divine: The Marine Folklore of Pliny the Elder," *Green Letters* 25 no.2 (2021): 148-149.

³⁵ Cf., for example, his discussion on dolphins (*HN* 9.20-32) and the catching of fish (*HN* 9.56).

³⁶ Cf., for example, *gremio* (*HN* 2.154) and *indignatione* (*HN* 33.1).

ecocriticism is to discuss “the divisive epistemologies that create an illusory sense of an ontological dissociation between the human and the nonhuman realms.”³⁷ In other words, the ecocritical approach problematizes notions that are often taken for granted, such as the strict separation between nature and culture, humans and animals, in order to undermine forms of anthropocentrism that have left little space for other elements in nature.³⁸ On the one hand this approach perfectly suits the blending of nature and culture in the *HN*, which Beagon and Wallace-Hadrill have extensively pointed out. On the other hand, it conflicts with the idea that Pliny’s framework is very much centred around human interests. Pliny associates the human and nonhuman realms, but humans are still the driving force behind his work. His environmentalist view of nature is based on the idea that human interests are the main concern. The ecocritical approach might, therefore, provide useful tools in analysing this ambiguity in Pliny’s thinking.

Ecocriticism provides conceptual tools to close the gap between humans and all things that are not humans. In general, we take for granted that humans exist differently from all things that are not human, such as animals, plants or objects in nature. We seem to think that the interests of humans outweigh the interests of animals or plants, if we keep cows as livestock or cut down trees for furniture. It is unclear, however, how we measure these interests or how we value them differently. In *Pandora’s Hope*, Bruno Latour argues that we should understand ‘nonhumans’, that is objects, artefacts and structures interacting with humans, as full-fledged actors in our human collective.³⁹ Iovino and Oppermann interpret this actor-agency as the world’s phenomena taking part in a conversation between human and nonhuman beings. They argue that things draw their agency from their place within discourses that structure human relations to the world’s nonhuman phenomena.⁴⁰ The *HN* is, of course, a discourse that structures human relations to the world’s nonhuman phenomena. In the *HN*, the earth gains agency because Pliny presents her as a moral actor which reacts strongly to harm and injustice. Pliny grants the earth a voice: she is transformed into a conversational character that takes an active part in the development of his discourse.

In ecocritical thinking the conversational metaphor is used as a tool to close the gap between humans and nonhumans. According to Iovino and Oppermann the term ‘conversation’ is not simply a metaphor. After all, nonhumans draw agency from their involvement in works such as the *HN*. Nonhumans should, therefore, no longer be seen as objects depending on a subject, but as actors that take part in a conversation with human and other nonhuman beings. All the world’s phenomena are segments of this conversation whether they materialize in species extinction, climate policies, the exploitation of natural resources or in the voices and

³⁷ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, “Introduction: The Environmental Humanities and the Challenges of the Anthropocene,” in *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene*, eds Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 4. See also Christopher Schliephake, *The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 7 who quotes Iovino and Oppermann.

³⁸ Schliephake, *The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World*, 7, 15.

³⁹ Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s hope: essays on the reality of science studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 174. For a summary of this position see Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, “Introduction: Stories Come to Matter,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 3-4.

⁴⁰ Iovino and Oppermann, “Introduction: Stories Come to Matter,” 4.

experiences of the nonhuman world.⁴¹ The way in which we think language and reality together, or, in other words, how we structure these discourses depends on deliberate ‘conversational’ decisions on our part.⁴² In *Facing Gaia*, Latour asks us to suspend the usual reading grid that makes us tend to contrast human and nonhuman actors in literature. It will then become clear, he argues, that to say of an actor that it has no agency or that it is animated (endowed with a soul) “is a secondary and derivative operation.”⁴³ Since there is no fundamental difference between the behaviour of humans and natural phenomena, we distribute agency to the human world only arbitrarily. Latour gives the example of the Mississippi river in Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* whose agency (“lawlessness”) is so powerful that it imposes itself on the agency of all the bureaucrats that try to tame it. From this, it follows that whether to endow humans with a soul or, as Mark Twain and Pliny do, to animate nature is a conscious decision made after observing the behaviour of humans or nonhumans.⁴⁴ Pliny’s animating of nature is, then, a secondary, deliberate rhetorical strategy.

The flipside of these agency-endowing conversations is that they may be used to deny the integrity of nature. Murray Bookchin notes that terms borrowed from human social hierarchies acquire remarkable weight when plant-animal relations are described. To make anthropomorphic judgements about natural phenomena, to say that rivers can be ‘tamed’ or that the earth is a ‘mother’ to human beings is to deal with nature as a dimension of society. Even more sinister, Bookchin argues, is the use of hierarchical terms to provide natural phenomena with order (“queen bee”). This procedure reinforces human social hierarchies “by justifying the command of human beings as innate features of the ‘natural order’. Human dominion is thereby transcribed into the genetic code as biologically immutable.” The analogies between nature and society that these hierarchical terms create are, therefore, striking commentaries “on the extent to which our visions of nature are shaped by self-serving social interests.”⁴⁵ This means that we should take into account Pliny’s ‘self-serving social interests’ while reading the *HN*, or any treatise, article or documentary on nature for that matter. The questions I would like to ask in this thesis are, then, whether nature truly gains agency in treatises such as the *HN*; whether Pliny is having a conversation *with* or *about* nature and what exactly his ‘self-serving social interests’ are. I aim to argue that Pliny’s anthropomorphic judgments and his moralistic digressions on nature-human interactions do not so much protect the integrity of nature as promote the Roman empire as the natural and even moral ruler of the world. This aspect of Pliny’s empire building I have already briefly illustrated above in the context of the Chauci. In the following chapters I will do so more extensively.

⁴¹ Iovino and Oppermann, “Introduction: Stories Come to Matter,” 4.

⁴² Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 50 and Iovino and Oppermann, “Introduction: Stories Come to Matter,” 4 for the same idea in different words.

⁴³ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 50.

⁴⁴ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 50-59.

⁴⁵ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: the Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982), 27.

Chapter One

Figure 1: Tellus Relief

Peace with Nature

Pliny's Rome was ornate with nature that served the social interests of its people. Annette Giesecke argues that the Romans "did more than open their cities' walls to Nature. They embraced her and held her fast. Nowhere is this truth more apparent than in that most intimate of spaces, the dwelling house. Quite unlike its Classical and Hellenistic Greek counterparts, the Roman house strove to bring its occupants into contact with Nature. While the Greek house functioned as a barrier against the penetration of the natural world, the Roman house was built with an eye towards domesticating it."⁴⁶ The ubiquity of these urban domestic gardens, she says, is the "clear manifestation of a social ideal, a utopian impulse both forward and backward looking."⁴⁷ Public monuments emanated this utopian impulse just as well. Before moving on to Pliny, it is worth pointing out one such monument that might have afforded reflection on utopian human-nature interactions: the Ara Pacis.

Nowadays the monument is embedded in an urban environment, grappled between the busy Via di Ripetta and Lungotevere in Augusta and blocking direct access to the Tiber from the Mausoleum of Augustus. The museum housing the monument serves as barrier against the penetration of the natural world, that would otherwise corrode the intricate reliefs. During the early Roman empire, the situation was markedly different. The monument was free-standing, but integrated with the Horologium Augusti and the Mausoleum in the Campus Martius. The public garden surrounding the Mausoleum, thickly covered with ever-greens, had promenades and all sorts of plants and trees that would have given any visitor the impression of being 'in nature'.⁴⁸ The reliefs of the altar's precinct walls reflected this natural environment. Nowadays the altar's white sculptures appear only as a cold abstraction of nature, whereas the ancient Roman visitor would have been immersed in colourfully painted scenes. Swans perch on sprawling vines while lizards crawl between the leaves. On the left of the back entrance, one of the best preserved panels depicts a maternal deity holding two children in her arms. She is accompanied by two other women who represent the earth and sea winds (figure 1). A peaceful, natural scene surrounds her, an ox and a sheep at her feet and fruit-bearing plants flowering in the background. The deity has often been identified as Tellus, but may also represent Ceres, Pax, or Venus. The panel as a whole undoubtedly depicts a dawning Golden Age, characterized by fertility and abundance.⁴⁹

A dawning Golden Age in which nature's motherhood and the Roman empire join in harmony is one of the core propagandistic claims of Augustus' rule. Depictions of maternal deities in nature served as models for elite Roman motherhood; as models for fertility and the

⁴⁶ Annette L. Giesecke, *The Epic City: Urbanism, Utopia, and the Garden in Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 100.

⁴⁷ Giesecke, *The Epic City*, 103.

⁴⁸ Cf. Strab. 5.3.8 and Suet. *Aug.* 100. Virginia L. Campbell, "Stopping to Smell the Roses: Garden Tombs in Roman Italy," *Arctos* 42 (2008): 40-41.

⁴⁹ For discussions on the Tellus relief and the meaning of the maternal deity see Karl Galinsky, "Venus, Polysemy, and the Ara Pacis Augustae," *American Journal of Archaeology* 96 no.3 (1992): 457-475 and Paul Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder* (München: C.H. Beck, 1987), 177-184.

nourishing of children. The association of, for example, Ceres with women from the imperial family was exploited widely for the purposes of political propaganda.⁵⁰ However, mother-earth-imagery does not issue a political message alone (a theme to which I turn in the third chapter), but also a moral one about humanity's relation with nature. The Tellus relief depicts both a dawning Golden Age under Augustus and a version of humanity that lives in peaceful harmony with nature. I aim to argue that there is more to say about Pliny's 'mother earth' if we keep this double-sided message in mind.

As I pointed out in the introduction, Pliny uses the 'mother earth' metaphor to make sense of the world in terms that he understands on the basis of his own motivations. In this chapter, I aim to examine the explanatory power of Pliny's mother metaphor. This explanatory power lays partly in her care for mankind through her fertility and nourishment.⁵¹ Both the *Ara Pacis* and Pliny's praise of the earth as a mother, which I quoted in the introduction (*HN* 2.154), are examples of this kind of earthly care. I aim to argue that there is another sense in which Pliny's language has explanatory power, namely in terms of 'moral care'.⁵² In the introduction I noted that Pliny's earth is a *moral* actor that reacts strongly to injustice. I aim to show that motherhood adds another dimension to the earth's morality. First, I explain what was expected of the ideal Roman mother in caring for her children and how this relates to Pliny's 'mother earth'. Second, I give examples of nature's moral care for mankind. I mainly read agricultural passages from the *HN*, because, as Beagon remarks, "agriculture is an area of man's 'life in nature' where his interaction with Nature is at its most intimate."⁵³ Intimate and familial interaction serves as a suitable starting point for a discussion on motherhood.

Earth as the Ideal Roman Mother

The ideal Roman mother was expected to be a moral authority. In Tacitus' *Dialogus*, Messalla ascribes the decline of Roman virtue and eloquence to the carelessness of parents.⁵⁴ "Long ago," he says, "everyone's son, born from a morally pure parent, was raised not in the room of a bought nurse, but in the lap and at the bosom of his mother" (*nam pridem suus cuique filius, ex casta parente natus, non in cellula emptae nutricis, sed gremio ac sinu matris educabatur, Dial.* 28.4). Messalla contrasts the intimacy of a mother's lap and bosom to the detached atmosphere of a nurse's room. He gives the impression that the closeness shared between a mother and her children indicates her moral purity (*castitas*). Instead of being elsewhere outside the household,

⁵⁰ Barbette S. Spaeth, *The Goddess Ceres: A Study in Roman Religious Ideology* (Dissertation. John Hopkins University, 1987), 95-97.

⁵¹ See Liz Gloyd, *The Ethics of the Family in Seneca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 23-25 for a discussion of parallels between the creation processes of nature and mothers in Seneca's *ad Marciam* and *ad Helviam*. Seneca, for example, uses *genuit* to describe the action of creation that nature performs because it is analogous to giving birth to children.

⁵² There is another sense in which motherhood has explanatory power in the *HN*. Motherhood is ingrained in its premise. Pliny's *sterilis materia*, which I discussed in the introduction, already implicates motherhood. The term *mater* in *materia*, which shares the same root, refers to what is primary and essential for existence, in other words, what is primary for life (*hoc est vita, Pref.* 12-13). Cf. Spaeth, *The Goddess Ceres*, 92. This etymology lends existential authority to Pliny's work, because it is both about and a derivative of motherhood.

⁵³ Mary Beagon, "Burning the Brambles: Rhetoric & Ideology in Pliny, 'Natural History' 18 (1-24)," in *Ethics & Rhetoric: Classical Essays for Donald Russell on his seventy-fifth birthday*, ed. Doreen Innes, H.M. Hine and D.A. Russell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121.

⁵⁴ Cf. *neglegentia parentum* (*Dial.* 28.2).

she exemplifies the fashion of the ‘good old days’ by taking personal care of her offspring. An elderly relative (*maior aliqua natu propinqua*, *Dial.* 28.4), being even more ingrained in the *mores* of the past, would be selected to bolster her moral authority. She would support the young mother in her tasks and give her the authority that comes with age, so that the children would not do “what was dishonourable to do” (*neque facere quod inhonestum factu*, *Dial.* 28.4). A mother would not only regulate their upbringing but “also their time of leisure and their games” (*remissiones etiam lususque*, *Dial.* 28.5). She would thus make sure that her influence reached all aspects of her children’s lives, not even removing herself from their free time.

Messalla proceeds to name some of these exemplary mothers. Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, Aurelia, of Caesar, and Atia, of Augustus, all personally educated future leaders of the state.⁵⁵ Their goal was to shape them into good people “whose nature, free from depravities, would take hold of virtuous actions” (*nullis pravitatibus detorta [...] natura [...] arriperet artes honestas*, *Dial.* 28.6). They would prepare them for their careers, “whether their nature was bent towards becoming a soldier, lawyer, or public speaker” (*et sive ad rem militarem sive ad iuris scientiam sive ad eloquentiae studium inclinasset*, *Dial.* 28.6). Ideally, within a Roman household, care and education are two sides of the same coin. Career preparation and moral teaching form an integral part of the care of Roman mothers. But the true takeaway here is that Roman mothers should recognize the nature of their children. Some children are inclined to becoming soldiers, others lawyers or public speakers, or, presumably in the case of future leaders of the state, a combination of the three. Cornelia, Aurelia and Atia raised virtuous children, because they fostered their natural inclinations towards a moral life. A good upbringing, therefore, consists of moral teachings that unfold according to nature. In this way, mothers were expected to help their children to achieve their natural ambitions. They would continue to act as the moral mentors of their children well into their adult lives to bring out these ambitions.⁵⁶

Suzanne Dixon notes that mothers who won praise from Roman biographers and moralists were those who instilled virtue in their sons. Just as the moral reputation of Roman mothers conferred status on their children, the achievements of their children in turn reflected on them.⁵⁷ Venus in the *Aeneid* is the archetypal Roman mother in this respect. She gives advice to her son, demonstrates concern and as a result she becomes the progenitor of the Roman people.⁵⁸ She raises a future state leader because she recognizes the nature of her son and helps him to achieve his destiny. In return, the Romans honoured her as a divine mother figure and progenitor of their people. Seneca argues that even the raising of a child itself is ample reward for a Roman mother’s toil. In his consolation *ad Marciam* he assures Marcia, who mourns the death of her son, that her motherly tasks have been rewarded enough by the raising of her son alone.⁵⁹ He says that “the reward for raising a son lays in the act of raising itself, in having had him and having loved him” (*fructus educationis ipsa educatio est [...] ipsum quod habuisti, quod amasti*, *Marc.* 12.2). He continues to praise the qualities of her son, his early prudence,

⁵⁵ Cf. *praefuisse educationibus ac produxisse principes liberos* (*Dial.* 28.6).

⁵⁶ Gloyn, *The Ethics of the Family*, 15-16, 188.

⁵⁷ Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 2, 6.

⁵⁸ Eleanor Leach, “Venus, Thetis and the Social Construction of Maternal Behavior,” *The Classical Journal* 92 no. 4 (1997): 366.

⁵⁹ Cf. *provenerunt enim satis magni fructus laborum tuorum ex ipsa educatione* (*Marc.* 12.2).

sense of duty, him being a husband and father, his diligence in public offices and his priesthood.⁶⁰ Seneca too makes the early achievements of Marcia's son reflect positively on her motherhood. He praises his qualities as a human being insofar as they were the qualities of Marcia's son. Her direct reward is the act of having loved a son with a successful career and a life of high moral standing.

Gods in Roman literature often help humans achieve their ambitions and lives of high moral standing through their *providentia* and *benignitas*. Venus, whose motherly heart is frightened for Aeneas,⁶¹ shows both when she asks Vulcanus to make weapons for her son. She shows *providentia*, or foresight, for the wars to come and *benignitas*, or kindness, by providing her mortal son with a divine shield. Venus uses these character traits to educate and take care of her son, enabling him to achieve his ambitions. As the archetypal Roman mother, she exemplifies the idea that a mother should possess these character traits to properly educate and care for her children. In Stoic philosophy nature too demonstrates concern for humans through her *providentia* and *benignitas*. In the *HN*, nature displays her *providentia* and *benignitas* exclusively through the earth. Pliny says that "the earth is the only element that is never angry with mankind" (*hanc esse solam quae numquam irascatur homini, HN 2.154*); she is "benign, gentle, indulgent and always a maid in the service of mortals" (*at haec benigna, mitis, indulgens, ususque mortalium semper ancilla, HN 2.155*). As pointed out in the introduction, the earth acts especially like a mother to human beings when they have been abandoned by the rest of nature.⁶² Pliny does not explain what he means by 'the rest of nature', but it appears that the earth alone, of all the elements in nature, is benign enough to take care of mankind until the end.

Nature and the earth fulfil different roles in this respect.⁶³ Nature manifests herself *through* the earth and is therefore not the same as the earth. The earth, like the sea, is an element that exists as a manifestation of nature but is not herself nature. Pliny takes the mother metaphor one step further, perhaps one step too far, as he philosophizes on the cruel manifestations of nature. In the introduction I have already pointed out that nature's *benignitas* manifests itself in the earth, but not, for example, in the sea. The sea's unkindliness becomes evident from the condition of the Chauci, who, says Pliny, live in a constant battle against the tides. Accordingly, he ascribes a different role to nature by using a rather derivative mother metaphor (*HN 7.2*):

Principium iure tribuetur homini, cuius causa videtur cuncta alia genuisse natura magna, saeva mercede contra tanta sua munera, ut non sit satis aestimare, parens melior homini an tristior noverca fuerit.

The first place is rightly attributed to man, because of whom great nature seems to have produced all other things, with a cruel price for all her gifts, so that it is not possible to determine sufficiently whether she has been a better parent or a more evil stepmother to man.

⁶⁰ Cf. *tantae indolis, quanta tuus fuit, iuvenis cito prudens, cito pius, cito maritus, cito pater, cito omnis officii curiosus, cito sacerdos* (*Marc.* 12.3).

⁶¹ Cf. *haud animo nequiquam exterrita mater* (*Aen.* 8.370).

⁶² Cf. *iam a reliqua natura abdicatos tum maxime ut mater operiens* (*HN* 2.154).

⁶³ Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 160.

Pliny reasons that nature does not necessarily deserve a motherly title, even though she produces things for the benefit of mankind. Nature shows her *benignitas* on earth but asks a cruel price for her gifts. Another possible title for nature, then, may be that of the ‘evil stepmother’.⁶⁴ This passage precedes a discussion on human births. Nature, as ‘evil stepmother’ acts particularly cruel in her manifestation during birth. Nature casts away naked babies on naked ground to burst out into tears immediately (*nudum et in nuda humo natali die abicit ad vagitus statim et ploratum*, *HN* 7.2). The earth, in contrast, deserves her ‘motherly title’, because of her merits as caretaker of mankind. The earth nourishes human beings and takes them into her lap, whereas nature leaves them naked and alone to fend for themselves.⁶⁵

Before moving on to instances of nature’s *providentia* in the *HN*, I would like to note two further points of agreement between Messalla’s ideas about motherhood and Pliny’s description of nature. First, both Pliny’s evil stepmother and Messalla’s nurse from outside serve as substitutes that are insufficiently capable of raising children. Nature, as an evil stepmother, does not have the best interest of her children in mind, and nurses from outside the household cause the decline of the moral standards of the younger generations. Pliny, thus, critiques nature’s actions that do not have beneficial outcomes for mankind. He views these particular actions as immoral because they do not fit nature’s role as a mother figure. Second, Pliny’s use of ‘maid’ to define the earth’s role does not contradict her moral authority and title of ‘maternal veneration’. In the same vein Messalla argues that a mother’s highest praise is that she manages the house and that she *serves* (*inservire*) her children.⁶⁶ For Messalla, the morality of motherhood stems from the submissive role of the mother towards her children. Likewise, according to Pliny, the earth deserves praise because she is submissive to mankind in her role as caretaker. These two points illustrate that, in the view of Pliny and Messalla, mothers should be physically close to their children, and should dedicate every aspect of their lives to them, as if they were enslaved, to endow them with the highest moral standards. The earth, who behaves like such a mother figure in the *HN*, deserves praise because she is close to mankind and dedicates herself entirely to their nourishment.

Mother Nature’s Home Schooling

The topic of book 18, on the history of grain, covers an essential part of mankind’s nourishment. In *HN* 18.5, Pliny himself states that life (*vita*) depends on the countryside and rustic practices.⁶⁷ The book contains many examples of nature’s *providentia*. With its 365 paragraphs it is twice

⁶⁴ According to Augustine (*Contra Iulianum Pelag.* IV.12.60), Cicero makes the same analogy in his *Republic* (3.1), as he reflects on man’s weakness at birth.

⁶⁵ Cf. *eximia propter merita* (*HN* 2.154) and (*natos alit [...] novissime complexa gremio*, *HN* 2.154). This difference between nature and earth allows Pliny to say, for example, in *HN* 2.206, following a brief discussion on earthquakes, that we should talk about the marvels of the earth rather than the crimes of nature (*terrae miracula potius dicamus quam scelera naturae*). The earth is a benign manifestation of nature, but nature may act cruelly in other instances, such as earthquakes. However, Pliny’s philosophy makes it difficult to understand what events should be attributed to the earth as a manifestation of nature, or to nature alone.

⁶⁶ Cf. *cuius praecipua laus erat tueri domum et inservire liberis* (*Dial.* 28.4).

⁶⁷ Cf. *rura agrestesque usus, sed quibus vita constet* (*HN* 18.5). With this statement he admits as much that the subject of his work (*hoc est vita*, *HN Pref.* 12-13) depends on his discussion of the countryside. In any case, he makes clear that agriculture is an indispensable part of his work.

as long as most of the other books. As the half-way point of the *HN* it is the suitable place for a reiteration of intent.⁶⁸ In *HN* 18.1, Pliny makes this reiteration explicit. He announces that he will plead the earth's defence and support her as the parent of all things even though he already did so at the beginning of his work.⁶⁹ Book 18 therefore functions as a 'proem in the middle' in which Pliny reboots his praise of the earth from book two. This technique in structuring a work fits Pliny's framing of the *HN* as a poetic collection, which I pointed out in the introduction. Proems in the middle are at first a poetic feature. He, therefore, not only presents his work as if it were a poetic booklet, but also structures it as such. In book two he praises the earth as follows: "who is forced to produce, who pours out of her own accord, what scents and flavours, what juices, what senses, what colours! How genuinely has she repaid the interest lent to her! What things does she provide for our benefit!" (*Quae coacta generat, quae sponte fundit, quos odores saporisque, quos sucos, quos tactus, quos colores! Quam bona fide creditum faenus reddit! Quae nostra causa alit!* *HN* 2.155). Pliny does not make clear what he means by 'lent interest' but the implication may be seeds planted by farmers from which she grows crops in return. He presents the earth as part of a transaction in which she takes a subordinate role as debtor opposite a creditor. Pliny uses this juridical terminology again in 18.1, in which the earth 'stands trial'. Furthermore, he repeats his praise of the "variety and number, the flowers, scents, colours, juices and powers of plants that the earth produced for the health and delight of mankind" (*si quis aestimet varietatem, numerum, flores, odores, coloresque et sucos ac vires earum quas salutis aut voluptatis hominum gratia gignit*, *HN* 18.1). The parallels between 2.155 and 18.1 illustrate that Pliny takes his proem in the middle serious and that he is still set on praising the earth's gifts for mankind.

Pliny's praise of the earth's fertility and abundance corresponds to the Tellus relief on the Ara Pacis. The relief depicts nature's care of humanity. Her care is accentuated by a variety of fruits and plants, the colours of which stimulated the imagination of the attentive visitor. Even a sense of taste or smell is suggested by the child that hands an apple to the motherly figure watching over him. The imagery signals nature's *providentia* under the rule of Augustus.⁷⁰ The motherly figure, in combination with the natural scenery, anticipates a period in which the gifts of the earth are never wanting. Pliny echoes this utopic vision when he describes the earth as a caring mother that provides for the benefit of humanity. From the start of book 18, Pliny makes nature's *providentia* into one of the central themes of his work. Nature's insight into the needs of humanity becomes one of her defining characteristics.

Beagon notes that the term *providentia* denotes the idea that the world is planned for the benefit of humanity. This quality is closely linked with the world's rationality and intelligence.⁷¹ Pliny remarks, for example, that nature gives explicit signals for the right

⁶⁸ Beagon, "Burning the Brambles," 120-121. He does so specifically in *HN* 2.154-157.

⁶⁹ Cf. *patrocinari terrae et adesse cunctorum parenti iuvat, quamquam inter initia operis defensae* (*HN* 18.1). In chapter 2, I aim to address this juridical terminology briefly and to explain against whom he tries to defend the earth.

⁷⁰ Zanker argues that monuments such as the Ara Pacis evoked visions of an *aurea aetas*, a Golden Age. He sees an example of divine providence in the reliefs on the entrance side of the altar. The reliefs juxtapose Aeneas and Romulus, depicting Aeneas's arrival in Latium and the she-wolf with the twins. Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, 177, 206. The Tellus relief depicts a peaceful Roman world under divine auspices just as well but is less embedded in traditional Roman mythology.

⁷¹ Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 36.

moment to start sowing: “exactly on midwinter the pennyroyal blossoms in our pantries: so, nature wants nothing to be hidden; and therefore she has given this signal for sowing” (*ipso brumali die puleium in carnariis florere: adeo nihil occultum esse natura voluit; et serendi igitur hoc dedit signum, HN 18.227*). Nature’s transparency towards mankind is one of the qualities that makes her *bona fide*.⁷² She has no intention to deceive by obscuring her signs. In the following paragraph, Pliny calls the blooming of the mastic-tree “an even more obvious sign [for the sowing season] in the still more wonderful foresight of nature” (*alia manifestior ratio mirabiliore naturae providentia, HN 18.228*). According to Pliny, the recognition of these signs is “the true method of interpreting nature with her own arguments” (*haec est vera interpretatio argumenta naturae secum adferens, HN 18.227*). These arguments are the rationalized version of the signs of nature’s *providentia*. Pliny combines empiric observations with Stoic rationalizations of nature to confirm his thesis that nature provides for the benefit of mankind. In a discussion on periods of danger for crops and harvests, he suggests that the reader “should appreciate the kindness of nature” (*et in hoc mirari benignitatem naturae succurrit, HN 18.291*). Nature, and the course of the stars and the law that governs it in particular, allows these dangers to happen only at certain moments in time that are easy to forecast.⁷³ In these examples, Pliny stresses that his interpretation of natural events is rational. Nature’s *argumenta, ratio* and her *lex* manifest itself on the earth for the benefit of farmers. Thus, nature’s intelligence makes the earth the natural element of mankind.

Pliny does not lose the educational context in describing instances of nature’s care. In book 17, on cultivated trees, he phrases nature’s *providentia* in educational terms.⁷⁴ In a passage on soil varieties, he argues that “still, nature did not want us to be uninstructed, and she made imperfections evident even where she had not done the same with certain good things” (*non tamen indociles natura nos esse voluit, et vitia confessa fecit etiam ubi bona certa non fecerat, HN 17.32*). Nature uses certain qualities of the soil to indicate its suitability for planting crops. In the following passage, he explains how these qualities indicate (*demonstrare*) imperfections in the soil. Black undergrown plants demonstrate bitter soil and withered shoots demonstrate cold soil.⁷⁵ Again, in Pliny’s view, these plants and shoots are signs that nature uses to inform mankind. Pliny conceives these soil qualities as educational manifestations of nature for the benefit of the farmer. Nature also educates farmers on how to imitate her for their benefit. On various methods for planting trees Pliny says that “nature herself taught us the majority of these [methods], and in the first place how to sow seeds” (*ac pleraque ex his natura ipsa docuit et in primis semen serere, HN 17.59*). He implies that farmers imitated sowing from seeds falling from trees.⁷⁶ Later, he argues that nature herself “has demonstrated how to make nursery gardens” (*natura et plantaria demonstravit, HN 17.65*). Pliny argues that farmers imitated these nurseries from the clusters of shoots that are found at the roots of many trees. These examples show that educational practices, as well as her nourishment (*alere*) of mankind, constitute nature’s motherhood, her *providentia* and *benignitas*.

⁷² Cf. *HN* 2.155.

⁷³ Cf. *eorum quoque lege provisum (HN 18.291)*.

⁷⁴ Educational terminology in this context is not unusual in antiquity. Xenophon uses the same terminology when he argues that the earth, as a goddess, teaches justice (διδάσκει, *Oec.* 5.12).

⁷⁵ Cf. *terram amaram demonstrant (HN 17.33)* and *frigidam autem retorrige nata (HN 17.33)*

⁷⁶ Pliny also uses *docere* in 17.99, when describing how nature taught humanity grafting by means of seeds.

So far, the examples of nature's *providentia* and *benignitas* have not been explicitly moral. Nature's nourishment and educational practices are things that are expected of her as a mother, but they do not serve as examples of any moral standards to which Romans should adhere. Pliny, however, collects many instances in which nature teaches moral lessons. In book 21, on flowers, he argues that nature created weapons to make man more cautious and less greedy (*HN* 21.78):

Quid sibi voluit nisi ut cautiorem minusque avidum faceret hominem? Non enim et ipsis apibus iam cuspides dederat et quidem venenatas, remedio adversus has utique non differendo?

What did she want for herself except to make man more cautious and less greedy? Had she not already given the bees themselves spears, poisonous ones in particular, which should be cured by all means and without delay?

Nature poisons certain varieties of honey and endows bees with poisonous weapons to prevent mankind from obtaining too much honey. She sets a trap, takes on the role of 'evil stepmother' to teach mankind a lesson in caution and greed. Pliny does not discredit nature for her apparent lapse in *providential*. On the contrary, he praises her all the more for the moral lessons that result from it.⁷⁷ In another example from book 18, nature takes sides in a conflict between the Romans and the Salassi, an Alpine tribe that caused trouble on the frontier in the second century BC. The Salassi attempted to destroy the crops of farms lying below the Alps, but nature "disapproved of their efforts" (*respuebat natura*, *HN* 18.182). The Salassi proceeded by ploughing in the crops, but these came up in even greater numbers, so that nature had taught (*docere*) the practice of 'ploughing in' crops. In this example, nature sides with the Romans by interfering with the efforts of their enemies. In addition, she teaches a new type of agriculture that produces better harvests. Pliny thus makes sure that the moral standards of nature align with those of the Romans: she dedicates herself to the betterment of her children, and especially those that live in the middle regions of the earth.

But her children do not lay idle under her care. Pliny mentions some instances in which mankind repays its debt of care to nature. In book 17, for example, he says (*HN* 17.58):

Et abunde praedicta ratione caeli ac terrae nunc de iis arboribus dicemus quae cura hominum atque arte proveniunt. Nec pauciora prope sunt genera, tam benigne naturae gratiam retulimus.

After having given an account of climate and earth at great length before, now we will say something about those trees that are produced with the care and skill of humans. There are almost no fewer of these than of the wild kinds of trees, so liberally have we repaid our debt of gratitude to nature.

⁷⁷ See also Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 38. There are more examples of similar educational practices in the context of mining. I aim to address these examples in chapter two.

According to Pliny, mankind returns nature's *benignitas* in equal terms (*benigne*). Mankind's *benignitas* consists of care (*cura*) and skill (*ars*) in planting and grafting new trees, things that nature taught herself.⁷⁸ In this way, mankind repays its debt of care by adding to nature's abundance (*varietas; numerus*) but also by showing that nature's lessons have not fallen on deaf ears. Mankind's achievements thus reflect positively on the teachings of nature. Later in book 17, Pliny demonstrates that serving nature is essential to the existence of mankind. Pliny argues that brambles (*rubi*) would "cover everything if cultivation did not resist, so that it would seem, by all means, that men were born for the sake of the earth" (*repleturi omnia ni resistat cultura, prorsus ut possint videri homines terrae causa geniti, HN 17.96*). In other words, mankind is part of nature's immune system, removing bad, festering elements in order to keep her healthy. In this passage, Pliny illustrates how nature and culture (*cultura*) meet each other. Nature and culture are two different things, not in fact "indistinguishable" as Beagon puts it,⁷⁹ but they do go hand in hand. Pliny shows first that nature *needs* culture in order to keep the earth safe from harm; second, that what is good for mankind, i.e. arable fields free from brambles, is also good for nature. He seems to imply that mankind knows better than nature herself what is good for her. Brambles, despite being manifestations of nature, are not good for nature, because they prevent human cultivation. Human cultivation adds to the abundance of nature, as Pliny pointed out in *HN 17.58*, so that her authority depends as much on the care of mankind as mankind depends on her. Thus, the authority of mother nature exists by the grace of farmers that keep her cleared for cultivation.

According to Pliny, the earth prefers to be cultivated by a specific kind of farmer. In book 18, when dealing with the great abundance of wheat in the early republic, he argues (*HN 18.19*):

Quaenam ergo tantae ubertatis causa erat? Ipsorum tunc manibus imperatorum colebantur agri, ut fas est credere, gaudente terra vomere laureato et triumphali aratore, sive illi eadem cura semina tractabant qua bella eademque diligentia arva disponebant qua castra, sive honestis manibus omnia laetius proveniunt quoniam et curiosius fiunt.

What, then, was the cause of such great abundance? The fields were cultivated by the hands of generals themselves, if we are to believe it, and the earth rejoiced under a crowned ploughshare and a triumphant ploughman, whether they handled seeds with the same care as they handled their wars and arranged their fields with the same diligence as their camps, or everything grows happier under honorable hands because they do it more thoughtfully.

Generals make the land more fertile, because they mimic their martial skills on their fields, or because the earth reacts positively to their martial virtue. In contrast, Pliny disapproves of farming done by slaves or convicts because, he says, "whatever things done by desperate men are always the worst" (*coli rura ab ergastulis pessimum est, ut quidquid agitur a desperantibus, HN 18.36*). Thus, the earth seems to be especially susceptible to the care of farmer-generals.

⁷⁸ Cf. *HN 17.59; 17.99*.

⁷⁹ Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal*, 21.

They are not desperate, but skilled, thoughtful and honorable, and these virtues have a positive effect on the emotional attitude of the land. The earth enjoys interaction with virtuous farmers and shows her happiness with abundant harvests.

The idea that soldiers make good farmers appears in many agricultural handbooks from the Roman world. In these handbooks good farmers are always presented as honorable men and responsible soldiers. Cato, for example, says that “the farming class produces the bravest men and sturdiest soldiers” (*at ex agricolis et viri fortissimi et milites strenuissimi gignuntur, Agr. Pref. 4*). Columella argues that contemporary morals and devotion to luxury (*luxuria*) are out of tune with the strenuous manner of living and farming practices of the Roman generals of old (*Col. 1.Pref.14*). The skills and way of life of a farmer are thus deemed similar to the skills and way of life of the ideal Roman soldier and citizen. Farmer-generals are as capable in subjugating the earth as they are in subjugating armies or people. They are capable of making the earth serve their interest, so that she becomes a maid in the service of mortals, as Pliny would say. In addition, Pliny emphasizes the intimacy between farmer-generals and the earth. The earth ‘rejoices’ under their honorable hands. This intimacy makes sense in the light of nature’s motherly care. Like the ideal Roman mother, mother earth raises good soldiers, farmers and citizens, whose martial and agricultural virtues reflect positively on her own accomplishments as an educator. In short, mother earth produces responsible farmers in a way which the Romans would have expected from someone with her societal role.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that depictions of maternal deities in nature often served as models for elite Roman mothers, especially with regards to their fertility and the nourishing of children. However, I have argued that Pliny models the main natural deity in the *HN*, ‘mother nature’, after examples of ideal Roman mothers in history and literature. The ideal Roman mother was expected to educate her children, teach them a life of high moral standing, and raise them as responsible soldiers and virtuous citizens according to their natural inclinations. Instead of buying a nurse from outside the household, she would take personal care of her children and dedicate her life to them as if she were their servant. Divine mothers would demonstrate concern through *providentia* and *benignitas*, which were thus considered useful character traits in rearing ambitious children. Once their children had achieved their ambitions, and lived a moral life, she would reap the reward of having successful offspring. The virtue of her children reflected positively on her own status as an educator of morals. In the same way, Pliny’s nature, especially if she manifests herself as the earth, performs her duties as a mother to humanity. She nourishes her children, educates them, shows them when to sow and how to imitate her, and uses her intelligence, kindness and foresight to guide them. She teaches them moral lessons too, aligning herself with their best interest. Her children repay her by keeping her from harm and becoming successful and virtuous farmers.

But Pliny’s bouquet of gratitude to mother nature comes with prickly thorns. She remains as subservient to humanity as a Roman mother was expected to be to her children. She dedicates her body and intelligence to the betterment of mankind alone. The ideal farmer subjugates her as if he were arranging armies, yet she shows happiness under his plough. Her

relationship with mankind is as toxic as the honey she uses to teach her children lessons in greed, a relationship that is bound to result in misery.

Chapter Two

Figure 2: Las Medulas

War against Nature

In the foreword from a UN report from 2021 titled ‘Making Peace with Nature’, Secretary-General António Guterres argues that “humanity is waging war on nature.” He says that the report aims to show “the impacts and threats of the climate emergency, the biodiversity crisis and the pollution that kills millions of people every year” and that “our war on nature has left the planet broken.” The key to a prosperous and sustainable future are “making peace with nature, securing its health and building on the critical and undervalued benefits that it provides.”⁸⁰ Guterres does not explain why we should define our interaction with nature as a ‘war’ in particular, but his message is clear: our relationship with nature has resulted in misery.

Pliny uses similar language in his books on mining and quarrying. In book 33, on metals, he observes miners in search of gold wreaking havoc upon nature. After making entire mountaintops collapse, they “gaze upon the ruin of nature as conquerors” (*spectant victores ruinam naturae*, *HN* 33.73). Pliny may have witnessed these practices himself during his time as a procurator in Spain.⁸¹ The gold-mining site of Las Medulas in the province of León is a good example of the ‘ruined’ landscape that Roman miners left behind (figure 2). Roman miners drilled long galleries to undermine mountains that contained gold deposits. Subsequently, they cut through the supports so that the mountain collapsed “with a crash which the human intellect could not possibly conceive” (*fragore qui concipi humana mente non possit*, *HN* 33.73). Pliny’s account contains a paradox. The mining technique is invented by the criminal mind of mankind, but its results are beyond the human imagination. The effect of the miners on the environment thus eludes Pliny’s usual rationalization of human nature-interactions, which I discussed in chapter one. But Pliny’s account also shows his awareness of the impacts and threats of human industry on nature. He presents miners as if they were waging a war against nature. They certainly do not build on the benefits that nature already provides; they conquer nature through mining and leave her broken after their victory.

Bettina Reitz argues that Roman authors, when they describe interventions in nature by engineers, often personify nature so that she can actively resist the alterations of the landscape. The engineer, therefore, has to overcome this resistance and coerce nature into submission. This rhetoric of war can be used both positively and negatively, either to praise the achievement of the engineer or to highlight the transgressive nature of his enterprise.⁸² In this chapter I aim to discuss Pliny’s negative assessment of human-nature interactions. At the start of book 18, he argues that “we charge nature with our own crimes” (*nostramque culpam illi inputamus*, *HN* 18.2). Nature may have produced poisons but it is us who discovered it (*genuit venena, sed quis*

⁸⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *Making Peace with Nature: A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies*. 2021.

<https://wedocs.unep.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/34948/MPN.pdf>

⁸¹ P.R. Lewis and G.D.B. Jones, “Roman Gold-Mining in North-West Spain,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 60 (1970): 182 n.44.

⁸² Bettina Reitz, “Nature’s Helping Hand,” in *The Ideologies of Lived Space in Literary Texts, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Jacqueline Klooster and Jo Heirman (Gent: Academia Press, 2013), 125-126. Reitz discusses as a positive example Statius’ *Silvae* 4.3, a poem about the construction of the Via Domitiana.

invenit illa praeter hominem?, HN 18.2). It is not nature that stands on trial for the things that are harmful to us, but mankind. So, Pliny says, “let us confess our guilt” (*fateamur ergo culpam*, HN 18.4). In the context of mining, he finds plenty of reasons to confess our guilt. In the following, I aim to discuss how human-nature interactions change in the context of mining, as opposed to agriculture. First, I elaborate on Pliny’s mother metaphor, arguing that nature does not only take on the role of a mother, but also her physical form. This physical form enables Pliny to make human transgressions even more explicit. Second, I discuss passages about mining in which Pliny puts various aspects of human-nature interactions, which I described in chapter one, in a different light. I mainly read passages about mining, because during mining mankind seems to cause most damage to nature. I would argue that mining is an area of man’s life in nature where his interaction with nature is even more intimate than in agriculture. As I aim to point out, one of Pliny’s problems with mining is that mankind ignores the natural boundaries of the earth in order to exploit her resources. Mankind actively ‘disembowels’ its sacred mother for profit. This stands in contrast to most agricultural practices in which resources are taken from the surface of the earth, so that no harm needs to be inflicted on her body.

Embodying Mother Nature

In his *Natural Questions*, Seneca suggests that the earth is a living body. He argues that the earth is governed by nature like the system of our bodies “in which there are veins and arteries” (*in quibus et venae sunt et arteriae*, NQ 3.15.1). Just like our bodies, the earth reacts to blows or shocks. She bleeds rivers from her surface or forms scars that cover her wounds (NQ 3.15.6).⁸³ Pliny makes the analogy even more visceral when he says that humans “follow her entrails” and “go into her bowels” to obtain riches (*persequimur omnes eius fibras [...] imus in viscera*, HN 33.1-2). He endows the earth with organs so that she appears to be suffering in a way that we may recognize from our own bodies. In other words, the harm that miners inflict upon her becomes vividly recognizable. But Pliny takes the analogy one step further, by giving the earth a maternal body. He says, for example, that the earth has a lap (*gremium*) and that she is pregnant with ores (*gravida*).⁸⁴ This only increases our feelings of moral and physical unease when he describes attempts to uncover these metals. Perhaps the reader is reminded of the witch Erichtho in Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, who tears away the exposed bowels (*viscera*) of dead criminals and even fetuses from the wombs of their mothers.⁸⁵ Lucan emphasises that nature disapproves of Erichtho’s gruesome practices (*non qua natura vocabat*, *Luc.* 6.557). Thus, by endowing the earth with a body, Pliny enforces the idea that mining is an inherently immoral and even unnatural activity. Those who practice mining strip nature of her bodily integrity, like Erichtho disembowels her defenceless victims.

Two other poetic texts in Latin using similar language might have afforded reflection on mining as a violation of the earth’s bodily integrity.⁸⁶ I address these texts because they make

⁸³ In book 36, Pliny mentions scars forming in the mountains from quarrying (*compleri sponte illa montium ulcera*, HN 36.125). This is another example of a very human-body type reaction to damage. However, he describes this reaction as a positive thing for humanity’s demand for luxury. I will return to this example briefly in chapter three.

⁸⁴ Cf. HN 2.154 and HN 37.202. Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 39-40.

⁸⁵ Cf. *Luc.* 6.545-558.

⁸⁶ These two examples I have discussed before in a paper I wrote for Ancient Greek Utopian Thinking with Dr. T.A. van Berkel.

a different statement on agriculture than Pliny, which helps us to understand what he considers to be a healthy relationship with the earth. First, Lucretius had already envisioned the earth as a body susceptible to the destructive consequences of human violence and desire for hidden resources. In 5.1241-1296 he recounts the accidental discovery of metals during forest fires and how they came to be utilized in both agriculture and warfare. He presents several plausible explanations for these fires, such as a lightning strike from heaven, the ravages of war, the preparation of fields for agriculture or the pursuit of animal spoils (5.1244-1249). Metals would “flow from the veins [of the earth] heated by the fires” (*manabat venis ferventibus*, 5.1255) and coagulate (*concrescere*), allowing mankind to gather and utilize them (5.1257). Lucretius’ language suggests the flowing and clotting of blood. He himself uses *manare cruore* in his description of the great plague of Athens (Lucr. 6.1149). Vergil uses *concrescere* for the congealed blood of Turnus (*Aen.* 12.905). In this way, Lucretius presents a visceral image: the earth ‘bleeds’ as she is wounded by the disasters of human violence. Unlike Pliny, Lucretius portrays agriculture as a practice that has the potential to harm nature. The forest fires that might have resulted from the preparation of fields for agriculture exemplify this potential. In addition, later in the passage, Lucretius treats agriculture and war as related practices. He notes that bronze was first used to till the soil of the earth (5.1289) and to stir up the waves of war (5.1289-1290), in which “they sowed devastating wounds” (*vulnera vasta serebant*, Lucr. 5.1290). Afterwards, iron took over as the principal metal in agriculture and war (5.1295-1296). The agricultural metaphor “sowing wounds” hammers down the point that agriculture has as much harming potential as war. In short, Lucretius links agriculture to warlike violence and makes them evoke comparable images.

The second text that affords negative reflection on mining is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Pliny’s negative attitude towards mining echoes the utopic past and subsequent downfall of humanity in Ovid’s Ages of Man (*Met.* 1.89-150). In the first age, the Golden Age, humans were content with what the land provided. Humans of the Iron Age, on the other hand, sought their wealth in the bowels of the earth: “Not only did they demand crops and food they owed from the earth’s rich soil, but they reached into her bowels too, and they dug up the wealth that she had hidden and moved in the Stygian shades” (*Nec tantum segetes alimentaue debita dives / poscebatur humus, sed itum est in viscera terrae / quasque reconcliderat Stygiisque admoverat umbris, / effodiuntur opes*, *Met.* 1.137-140). Pliny’s choice of words and use of metaphor in *HN* 33.1-2, which I quoted in the introduction,⁸⁷ are very similar to Ovid’s. Note, for example, their use of *ire in viscera* to denote mining, and the idea that the earth’s wealth is hidden in the underworld (*in sede manium* versus *Stygiis umbris*). Again, Ovid has a different attitude towards agriculture. Rhiannon Evans remarks that Ovid criticizes agriculture as an act of injury by using ‘wounded’ as a metaphor for furrows: “nor wounded by any ploughshare the earth gave all things of its own accord” (*nec ullis / saucia vomeribus per se dabat omnia tellus*, *Met.* 1.101-2). The word *saucius* often implies damage inflicted on the human body during warfare.⁸⁸ In this way, Ovid, like Lucretius, makes warfare and agriculture analogous practices.

Pliny promotes a different relation with the body of the earth than Lucretius and Ovid do. At the start of book 33, he exclaims: “How innocent, how happy, in fact how luxurious even

⁸⁷ *Imus in viscera et in sede manium opes quaerimus, tamquam parum benigna fertilique qua calcatur.* (*HN* 33.2)

⁸⁸ Cf. *Saces ... sagitta / saucius ora* (*Aen.* 12.651-2). Rhiannon Evans, *Utopia Antiqua: Readings of the Golden Age and Decline at Rome* (London: Routledge, 2008), 38.

would life be, if it desired nothing from somewhere other than the surface of the earth” (*Quam innocens, quam beata, immo vero etiam delicata esset vita, si nihil aliunde quam supra terras concupisceret, NH 33.3*). For Pliny there is a moral gap between taking riches from the surface of the earth and taking them from her interior. Luxury is good if farmers take it from the fields, but it becomes degenerate once miners obtain it from her bowels. As I pointed out in chapter one, Pliny considers farmers to be noble people that make good citizens and soldiers.⁸⁹ The warlike nature of the farmer-general, however, does not drive him to do harm to the earth. On the contrary, they practice agriculture in imitation of and in collaboration with nature. The earth’s attitude towards their way of farming is, therefore, much more welcoming, even joyful, than in Lucretius and Ovid. Only in the case of slave gangs, who are not worthy of her worship, does she not voluntarily suffer the plough. She shows indignation, diminishes agricultural profits and generally prefers the hands of the farmer-general.⁹⁰ It appears that Pliny presents a more careful and responsible attitude towards agriculture than Lucretius and Ovid. Agriculture may be practiced by men who are skilled in war, but who avoid warlike destruction. Pliny’s farmer-generals mind the health of the earth. They stay on the surface without threatening to mutilate her body.

Before moving on to examples in which the earth’s body is disrupted, it is worth pointing out one negative social aspect of Pliny’s body metaphor. Pliny controls the earth’s literary representation by giving her a female body, which he exposes to his public. This is perhaps best explained by analogy with a consolatory letter from Seneca to his mother Helvia. In this letter, Seneca tries to console Helvia due to his exile to Corsica. He regards his mother’s virtue as the very quality that will enable her to endure his absence. Seneca describes her loss as a kind of penetration: “this recent wound, of all that have ever penetrated your body, is the worst, I confess: not only has it torn the surface of your skin, but it has destroyed your breast and bowels themselves” (*gravissimum est ex omnibus quae umquam in corpus tuum descenderunt recens vulnus, fateor: non summam cutem rupit, pectus et viscera ipsa divisit, Helv. 3.1*). Mairéad McAuley argues that there is a subtext of sexual violation in this passage. Seneca exposes his mother’s mutilated body in order to make her an example of virtuous mourning. According to McAuley, Seneca demonstrates his moral authority over his mother by exercising control over the penetration, display and interpretation of her body.⁹¹ Seneca’s language feels similar to Pliny’s representation of mining practices. Seneca descends into the bowels of his mother, tears away her flesh to ‘mine’ her feelings about his absence. Both Seneca’s psychological investigation and Pliny’s representation of mining seem involuntary and destructive to the victim. In the same way, Pliny may be thought to demonstrate his control and authority over his representation of the earth. He depicts her as a victim, who is disembowelled and humiliated

⁸⁹ Beagon would have a cynic answer to the question why Pliny does not frame agriculture as a violation of the earth’s body. Beagon suggests that Pliny’s ideal farmer would most probably be a man similar in position, education, and experience to himself. His ideal of the farmer-general, she conjectures, owed a great deal to Pliny’s own military background. Therefore, he would never put the blame on a profession he was actively involved in. Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 177.

⁹⁰ Cf. *HN* 18.21.

⁹¹ Mairéad McAuley, *Reproducing Rome: Motherhood in Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Statius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 181-183. She also shows that in Seneca’s consolatory letter the mother’s virtue is proof of the son’s virtue, just like her lack of self-control in grief would be proof of his weakness. Again, the mother’s status is thought to depend on the accomplishments of her son. See my discussion of Tacitus’ *Dialogus* in chapter one.

by her own children out of greed. She fights back, shows her ‘indignation’ by causing earthquakes, but is never able to stop her children completely from pursuing their greed. Thus, Pliny perpetuates the notion that the female body may be freely used, even tortured and exposed, to make philosophical statements. Seneca uses this trope to comment on Stoic virtue, Pliny to address human-nature interactions.

Domestic Violence

In chapter one I pointed out that, in Pliny’s view, nature is fundamentally benign and provident to mankind, especially if she manifests herself as the earth. Nature teaches humans, demonstrates concern for their wellbeing and provides generously for their needs. Pliny uses this personification of nature to make clear that humans must not try to take whatever nature does not readily provide. Nature has withheld metals and other precious resources from mankind because they are harmful, corrupting and sustain an insatiable greed for luxury. To mine these resources is, therefore, a morally reprehensible activity. Pliny summarises this moral attitude towards mining as follows: “Those things destroy us, those things drive us to the underworld, the things that she has hidden and drowned, those things that are not born suddenly” (*Illa nos peremunt, illa nos ad inferos agunt, quae occultavit atque demersit, illa quae non nascuntur repente, HN 33.3*). Again, Pliny alludes to the idea that things with which the earth is pregnant, and which she therefore does not readily provide, should not be taken prematurely. Pliny wonders what will be the end of draining the earth dry (*exhaurire*) and to what point “our avarice will penetrate” (*quo usque penetratura avaritia, HN 33.3*). Wallace-Hadrill argues that this avarice for luxury is one of the reasons for Pliny to write the *HN*: “For the whole work is underpinned by the simple idea that Nature supplies, unasked and ungrudgingly, everything man needs, but that man, blinded by *luxuria*, abuses nature and turns it into the tool of his own destruction; the function of science is to reveal the proper use of nature and so save mankind.”⁹² Avarice is a vice inherent to mankind. This vice is aimed at transgressing the boundaries of the earth for riches, despite nature’s best efforts to hide them away securely. Pliny shows that this conflict of interest, between mankind and nature, can only lead to violence.

Human strife for luxury sets the human-nature interactions I discussed in chapter one in a different light. Human-nature interactions do not revolve around principles of care any longer but lapse into the complete abuse of nature as a provider, or into desperate corrective measures on the part of nature. In the following, I aim to discuss the impact of luxury on the functioning of mankind and nature. First, the roles that nature and mankind played in chapter one, which Pliny presented as positive, now gain a negative meaning. The earth’s subservience to mankind, for example, which Pliny presented as a sign of her motherly dedication (*HN 2.155*), now becomes proof of mankind’s abuse. Pliny argues that the earth “is thrown into the sea, or dug away so that we can let in channels, and she is tortured at all hours with waters, iron, wood, fire, stone, crops and much more so that she serves our luxuries rather than our sustenance” (*in maria iacitur, aut ut freta admittamus eroditur, aquis, ferro, ligno, igni, lapide, fruge omnibus cruciatur horis, multoque plus ut deliciis quam ut alimentis famuletur nostris, HN 2.157*). Thus,

⁹² Wallace-Hadrill, *Pliny the Elder and Man’s Unnatural History*, 86.

the earth's subservience is a positive thing once she is made to provide sustenance, but a disaster once she is made to provide luxuries. For Pliny, the subservient role of the earth is not the problem, but the corrupt intentions of mankind. His work may help us to realize and correct our corruption.

Pliny even suggests that military qualities are harmful in the context of mining. As opposed to farmer-generals, who are capable caretakers of the earth, miners only seem to cause her harm. In order to make this point, he invents a 'miner-general', as I would call him. In book 33, Pliny says that the miners who collapse mountains "attack her with iron wedges" (*cuneis eam ferreis adgrediuntur*, *HN* 33.72). More explicitly, in book 36, on stones, he compares marble quarriers to some of the famous historical enemies of Rome (*HN* 36.1-2):

Omnia namque quae usque ad hoc volumen tractavimus hominum genita causa videri possunt: montes natura sibi fecerat ut quasdam compages telluris visceribus densandis [...]. Caedimus hos trahimusque nulla alia quam deliciarum causa, quos transcendisse quoque mirum fuit. In portento prope maiores habuere Alpibus ab Hannibale exsuperatas et postea a Cimbris.

Because everything we have examined up to this volume may be thought to have been produced in the interest of mankind: nature made mountains for herself as a sort of structure to keep together the bowels of the earth [...]. We cut these mountains to pieces, and we carry them off for no other reason than for luxuries. The scaling of these mountains used to be a remarkable feat. Our forefathers could hardly imagine that Hannibal, and later the Cimbri, had crossed the Alps.

Luxury drives mankind to undertake almost unconquerable feats, so their actions become warlike. Miners destroy (*caedere*) and plunder (*trahere*) the mountains that Rome's greatest enemies could barely conquer. Pliny seems to imply that nature had not only made these mountains to keep herself in check, but also to protect Italy from invading armies. Italy's miner-generals are, therefore, showing self-destructive behavior. First, they make the earth into an unsafe place for mankind, because the mountains might collapse on them: "so much more dangerous have we made the earth" (*tanto nocentiores fecimus terras*, *HN* 33.70). Second, they remove Italy's natural defenses against invading armies from the outer edges of the known world. Miner-generals have started a war against the landscape of Italy on which its inhabitants depend. They destroy the landscape, more than their enemies had ever done, just to acquire luxurious marble. Thus, their victory over the ruin of nature is, in the end, self-defeating.⁹³

In addition, these miner-generals disturb the order which nature set out for the earth. They destroy and plunder the structures that nature uses to keep the earth in check. The earth does not rejoice under their weapons any longer, but suffers defeat. Their triumph over nature is a dangerous event which shows a lack of foresight on the part of mankind. Mountains seem to function as a sort of skin, a *cutis*, which covers and protect the bowels of the earth. Removing the structures that keep the earth together can only result in her collapse. Here, Pliny calls upon the earth's 'self-regulating functions', as Evans remarks. Nature uses mountain ranges and

⁹³ Evans, *Utopia Antiqua*, 115.

punishing earthquakes to keep both herself and humanity in check.⁹⁴ The activities of miners, therefore, disturb a vital system that keeps the earth healthy. In other words, the miner-general is part of an immune disorder, whereas the farmer-general was part of an immune system. While the farmer-general removes festering bramble bushes to keep the earth healthy, the miner-general gnaws on the vital organs that nature uses to keep the earth from being disemboweled. Thus, mankind's military qualities which nature uses to her benefit in the context of agriculture, have now become the cause of her destruction. Luxury has perverted these qualities so that they have become nature's bane, rather than her boon.

Second, mankind's avarice for luxury has consequences for the meaning of nature's education. In the context of mining, nature uses education both to serve mankind's wellbeing and to protect herself from their violence. In book two, in his introduction to the earth, Pliny laments mankind's abuse of the earth, arguing that she is "tortured at all hours" (*omnibus cruciatur horis*, HN 2.157) more for luxuries than for sustenance. "Yet", Pliny says, "so that what she suffers on her surface and outer skin seems endurable, we penetrate her bowels, digging up veins of gold and silver and ores of copper and lead" (*ut tamen quae summa patitur atque extrema cute tolerabilia videantur, penetramus in viscera auri argentique venas et aeris ac plumbi metalla fodientes*, HN 2.157). With mining, mankind has perfected its techniques in torturing the earth. Pliny continues to explain that the earth actively tries to expel miners from entering her bowels: "And we are amazed, if she has also produced some things for our harm? Since wild animals, I believe, guard her, and ward off sacrilegious hands; do we not dig among serpents and do we not touch veins of gold with poisonous roots?" (*Et miramur si eadem ad noxam genuit aliqua? Ferae enim, credo, custodiunt illam arcentque sacrilegas manus; nonne inter serpentes fodimus et venas auri tractamus cum veneni radicibus?*, HN 2.158-159). Nature, Pliny argues, puts wild animals in mines to scare miners from entering her bowels. Like she does with honey, she poisons veins of gold to deter miners from disembowelling her. Nonetheless, Pliny proceeds to thank nature for her foresight. Her protective measures serve to keep humans from pursuing wealth which leads to crime, slaughter, and warfare.⁹⁵ Thus, education becomes a matter of desperation. Pliny's language seems to suggest that the earth finds herself in a life-or-death situation, comparable to the victims of Erichtho, at the mercy of human greed. The earth educates mankind to protect them from overconsumption, as she did with poisonous honey in book 21, but she protects herself even more from their violence.

In return, if avarice for riches from the earth becomes their driving force, humans tend to pervert the lessons taught by nature. Pliny mentions several examples in which mankind no longer imitates, but challenges nature. In book 37, on precious stones, he gives an account of the properties and uses of rock-crystal. He says that "glassware resembles these [rock-crystals]

⁹⁴ Evans, *Utopia Antiqua*, 115.

⁹⁵ Cf. HN 2.159. Pliny argues that nature, through her *benignitas* and *providentia*, bestowed a crucial flaw on one of the metals that causes these bad things: "The same kindness of nature stood against iron by punishing it with rust, and her foresight made nothing of all things more mortal than the thing that would be most dangerous to mortality" (*Obstitit eadem naturae benignitas exigentis ab ferro ipso poenas robigine eademque providentia nihil in rebus mortalius facientis quam quod esset infestissimum mortalitati*, HN 34.141). Ironically, nature made iron more mortal than the things which it may threaten. Earlier, Pliny discussed the benefits and vices of iron. He argues that iron serves as the best and the worst instrument in life, as it may be used for agriculture and construction but also for warfare and crimes. He says that the blame is not on nature, but on man, who perverts her gifts for devious purposes (HN 34.138). Nature tries her best to protect herself and humanity from harm but fails on account of the vices of humanity.

in a remarkable manner, but in an unnatural way, so that its price increases and that of crystal does not decrease” (*Mire his ad similitudinem accessere vitrea, sed prodigii modo, ut suum pretium auxerint, crystalli non deminuerint, HN 37.29*). It appears that glassblowers have perfected their glassware in such a way that it resembles naturally occurring rock-crystal. Pliny’s point here is not that these craftsmen add to nature’s abundance by making vessels that resemble rock-crystal, but that they do it in such a way that the value of their product increases. They flout nature with a more beautiful product, rather than that they imitate her, and they do it for profit. Pliny argues that the same is true for the fabrication of gold and silver products. In book 33, he exclaims: “Alas to our unnatural abilities, in how many ways have we increased the price of things! We have added the art of painting, and we have made gold and silver more precious by engraving it. Man has learnt to challenge nature” (*Heu prodiga ingenia, quot modis auximus pretia rerum! Accessit ars picturae, et aurum argentumque caelando carius fecimus. Didicit homo naturam provocare, HN 33.4*). Again the craftsmen are *prodigus*. Like the glassblowers, the gold- and silversmiths practice an unnatural craft and show disdain for what nature already has to offer. They add paintings and engravings to a natural product in order to increase its price. In doing so, Pliny argues, they do not imitate nature, but challenge her in the name of luxury.

Conclusion

According to Pliny, luxury drives mankind to wage a destructive war on nature. Miners disregard the earth’s health and do not build on the benefits that she already provides on her surface. In this chapter, I have shown that certain types of human-nature interactions which Pliny regards as positive, gain a negative meaning in the context of mining. First, Pliny embodies the earth, not only because of his Stoic ideas, but also for rhetorical purposes. The idea that the earth has a body, the body of a mother to be exact, increases our feelings of moral and physical unease when Pliny describes attempts to disturb her surface during mining. This rhetorical strategy allows us to think about mining in terms of harm. Furthermore, the body metaphor sets the farmer-general in a positive light, since it shows that he knows how to perform his practices in a responsible, careful and harm-free way. Second, Pliny shows that mining perverts certain aspects of human-nature interactions. The earth’s subservience to mankind, which was a sign of her motherly dedication in the context of agriculture, becomes proof of mankind’s abuse. She is subjugated not for sustenance, but for luxury. In the same vein, military qualities no longer function as a catalyst for a healthy relationship between nature and mankind. Luxury has transformed these qualities into a threat for the earth’s bodily integrity. Thus, Pliny puts the triumphant farmer-general opposite the warmongering miner-general. Lastly, education becomes a matter of desperation in the context of mining. Pliny suggests that the earth finds herself in a struggle for survival against conquering miners. At the mercy of their greed, she tries to educate them into cutting down on gold and silver, but at the same time she protects herself from their violence.

Pliny shows his awareness of the impacts of human industry on nature. He even shows sympathy, or understanding, for the earth’s condition. He associates the human and nonhumans realms in such a way that nature takes part in a conversation with humanity. He allows her to react to human behavior and allows us to understand that reaction in terms which we are familiar

with. But this is not the complete picture. As I have argued briefly, Pliny's language allows for control over nature as well. He controls her exposure and, in this way, influences the reader's imagination of nature and society. Furthermore, the aspects of human-nature interactions which he describes as negative in the context of mining, are very much present in the context of agriculture already. Pliny does not mind the subjugation of nature to mankind *per se*. He dictates when and how human control over nature becomes degenerate. He favors the idea that nature dedicates her body and intelligence to the betterment of mankind, but on his terms only. In short, Pliny uses nature to voice *his* opinion on human behavior. In other words, he gains control over nature, rather than that he gives it back to her. In the following chapter, I aim to argue that he does not confine his opinion on human-nature interaction to the realm of philosophy. He turns to empire-building as well.

Chapter Three

Figure 3: Roma Relief

Control over Nature

For the final chapter I turn to a second panel on the Ara Pacis, on the right of the back entrance. The Tellus relief, one of the altar's best-preserved panels, is mirrored by one of the worst preserved panels. This second panel is reconstructed on the basis of two marble fragments, one depicting a shield and the other a woman's lap. The reconstructed panel shows a female figure seated on a stack of trophy weapons (figure 3). She represents the goddess Rome, seated on the spoils of war, wearing Amazon armour and carrying a sword and sceptre. The relief most likely contained two other figures flanking the goddess, representing either *Honos* and *Virtus* or the Genius of the Roman People and the Genius of the Senate. The panel as a whole complements the Tellus relief: the two goddesses face each other, similarly seated on the spoils of nature and war, accompanied by two of their most trusted confidants. As a whole, the Ara Pacis glorifies Augustus and the peace he had brought through victory. The two panels, therefore, are the point of focus in the symbolic sequence of the artwork on the monument. The presence of the goddess Rome, opposite a maternal deity in nature, was meant to symbolize Augustus' reign. He had brought a state of natural peace by the force of Roman weapons.⁹⁶

The deities on both panels are essentially the same figure. Except for their clothes, and the objects that surround them, there are no defining characteristics to discern one from the other. They are generalizations of the female body that were not meant to tell something about womanhood *per se*, but to tell something about the reign of Augustus. The one female deity acts like a quantum-particle, being in two places at once and only collapsing into position when we observe her in one of her roles. The deity adds a new interpretation to the human-nature utopia that is represented in the Tellus relief. The one deity now represents both harmony in nature and Roman triumph. The Ara Pacis' mother-earth-imagery issues a political message: Rome and mother nature have become one under the auspices of Augustus' military control. The fact that first century copies of these two panels were found in Carthage indicates a wide distribution of this imperial message.⁹⁷ Roman emperors continued to favour the idea that they kept peace across the empire through conquest and a positive connection to nature. In contrast to this message of harmony, the triumphant goddess creates a hierarchical tension between humanity and nature as well. The maternal deity in the Tellus relief is now also a figure of control. The relief depicts a human figure with nature at her feet. She sits on the spoils of nature, just like her twin-sister sits on the spoils of war. In short, the panels combine two very different messages. On the one hand they represent Rome's peaceful unity with nature, on the other hand they represent Rome's control over nature.

Pliny combines the same two messages in his work. First, nature and culture go hand in hand. Nature serves humanity and humanity takes care of nature. Second, nature is and should

⁹⁶ Roberta-diane Perna, *Dea Roma on the Ara Pacis Augustae: An Artistic Symbol of the Roman Just War Tradition* (Dissertation. Ann Arbor, 1998), 38-40. The panel of the goddess Rome is reconstructed on the basis of similar depictions on coins and artwork.

⁹⁷ On the copies of the Tellus panel see Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, 310-312.

be subjugated to humanity. In this chapter I aim to discuss this second message. Already in the preface, Pliny tries to show his control over nature. As pointed out in the introduction, he praises himself for the fact that he managed to comprise the knowledge of the whole known natural world in 37 books. His encyclopaedic enterprise, therefore, is an attempt to gain control over nature. Latour would have argued that Pliny takes on the modern critical stance. In his work *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour argues that the modern critical stance establishes a partition between a natural world that has always been there and society with predictable and stable interests. He calls the process of partition ‘purification’. Purification creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand, and that of nonhumans on the other. By purifying our scientific objects we create and confront a total separation between nature and culture.⁹⁸ By presenting the topic of his work as *sterilis materia*, Pliny attempts the same process of purification. *Sterilis* contains both irony and praise, as I argued in the introduction, but it also creates a distance between the reader and the subject of the work. Pliny purifies nature, he ‘sterilizes’ her, in order to gain control over her scientific representation. This separation between nature and culture enables him to create hierarchies, with mankind on top. After he has completed this process, he is able to make nature heed his commands. He impresses his own Roman and Stoic morals on the structure of nature, reinforcing them in the process. He makes nature argue for his ideals so that they become part of the natural order of things.

Pliny’s rhetoric does not differ in this respect from the UN resolution I quoted in the introduction. The UN argues that we should spring into action against climate change and pollution because mother earth urges us to do so. They make nature argue for their own ideals, which seem to benefit both humanity and nature. Pliny’s rhetoric does not necessarily come to the benefit of nature. In this chapter, I aim to explain the aims of Pliny’s mother-earth-imagery. We might applaud his awareness of the destructive consequences of industry on the earth, but in this chapter I discuss passages that reveal a different message on human-nature interactions. First, I aim to explain how Pliny promotes Italy as a ‘second mother earth’. Second, I aim to argue that Pliny uses Rome and his own work as microcosms of nature to exert control over nature.

A Second Mother Nature

Pliny states three times that Italy is ruler of the world. His most elaborate expressions of praise of Italy appear in his introduction to Italy in book three, and in the last chapters of his final book, where he summarizes his findings.⁹⁹ In book three (*HN* 3.39), he says that Italy is known as “both the nursling and mother of all lands” (*dicatur terra omnium terrarum alumna eadem et parens*), that she was “chosen by the will of the gods” (*numine deum electa*) to unite empires across the world and “to draw together in conversation by commerce of discourse the inharmonious and wild languages of so many people and to give humanity to mankind, in short,

⁹⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10-11, 30.

⁹⁹ In *HN* 14.1 he says that Italy is said to be the parent of various countries that have certain varieties of trees in common (*licetque iam de communibus loqui, quarum omnium peculiaris parens videri potest Italia*). He does not elaborate here in what way Italy takes on the role of parent.

to become one fatherland for all different people in the whole world” (*tot populorum discordes ferasque linguas sermonis commercio contraheret ad colloquia et humanitatem homini daret, breviterque una cunctarum gentium in toto orbe patria fieret*). In the context of the rest of this book on countries and peoples, Pliny attributes an almost encyclopaedic role to Italy’s rule over the world. Italy’s divine destiny is to unite different languages and peoples into one fatherland. Keeping the preface in mind, in which Pliny announces that he would employ many foreign words, “barbarian even”, (*externis, immo barbaris, HN Pref.13*), it is as if Pliny and Italy embark on the same encyclopaedic endeavour. Italy, like Pliny in his 37 volumes, combines different elements of nature into one. In this way, both Pliny and Italy aim to take control of the world. They are both collectors: the first a collector of knowledge about nature, the second a collector of empires and goods in nature. Italy’s parent-role, however, has many connotations in the context of the rest of Pliny’s work, as I pointed out in the previous two chapters. He makes these connotations more explicit in the final book.

Here, Pliny takes his praise to another level, when he argues that Italy is a second mother to the world. In book three, Italy was a mother to all lands, but finally she competes with nature herself for the title of ‘mother of the world’. With all the powers that he professes to mother nature, he makes a clear statement by bestowing this role onto his fatherland (*HN 37.201-202*):

Ergo in toto orbe, quacumque caeli convexitas vergit, pulcherrima omnium est iis rebus quae merito principatum naturae optinent Italia, reatrix parensque mundi altera, viris feminis, ducibus militibus, servitiis, artium praestantia, ingeniorum claritatibus, iam situ ac salubritate caeli atque temperie, accessu cunctarum gentium facili, portuosis litoribus, benigno ventorum adflatu [...] aquarum copia, nemorum salubritate, montium articulis, ferorum animalium innocentia, soli fertilitate, pabuli ubertate. Quidquid est quo carere vita non debeat, nusquam est praestantius: fruges, vinum, oleum, vellera, lina, vestes, iuveni. [...] Metallis auri, argenti, aeris, ferri, quamdiu licuit exercere, nullis cessit terris et nunc intra se gravida pro omni dote varios sucos et frugum pomorumque sapes fundit.

Now in the whole world, wherever the vault of heaven turns, the most beautiful of all, with respect to those things that justly demonstrate nature’s empire, is Italy, ruler and second mother of the world, with her men and women, leaders, soldiers, class of slaves, her superiority in the arts, her splendour of geniuses, and again with her position and healthy sky and temperature, her easy access to all peoples, her shores with many harbours, the benign blowing of the winds [...] with her abundance of water, healthy forests, her mountains with their passes, the harmlessness of her wild animals, the fertility of her soil and the richness of her food. Anything which life should not lack, nowhere it is more superior: crops, wine, olive oil, wool, flax, clothing, young cattle. [...] In ores of gold, silver, copper and iron, as long as it was allowed to mine them, Italy submits to no other land and now, pregnant, she keeps them within herself, and as the whole dowry pours out various juices and flavours of crops and fruits instead.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ I translate ‘instead’ in the final line, because *fundo* can also be used for the pouring of metals. The curious phrase “as long as it was allowed to mine them” refers to a resolution by the senate prohibiting the exploitation of mines in Italy (cf. *sed interdictum id vetere consulto partum Italiae parci iubentium, HN 3.138*).

First, Pliny suggests a parallel between nature's motherhood and that of Italy, even though he does not make explicit in what way Italy fulfils this familial function. Perhaps, Italy takes the role of the elder relative that Roman mothers needed to bolster their moral authority. In this sense, Italy would protect and distribute nature's moral teachings. Undoubtedly, Pliny sees Italy as a second moral authority to all other empires united under her watch. She educates and civilizes, "makes manners gentle" (*ritusque molliret*, *HN* 3.39). Pliny's comparison suggests that Italy is provident and kind to her subjects, a reflection of her caring (*innocentia*) and benign (*benignus*) climate. Her laws carry the same weight as the laws of nature. Her 'superiority in the arts' and her 'splendour of geniuses', including Pliny himself, help people interpret the signs of nature. The people of Italy, after all, are capable of understanding nature as a whole, and therefore know best how to explain her.¹⁰¹ Pliny emphasizes that Italy is a second mother (*parens altera*), and not a substitute mother, like the nurse or stepmother. Italy's relation to the rest of the world is close and on a par with nature. She is not evil or foreign, but kind and personal with her subjects.

Second, Pliny's praise might remind the reader of *laudes Italiae*, such as in Vergil's *Georgics*.¹⁰² Like Vergil, Pliny praises all the things that Italy produces in people, crops, cattle and even metals. Italy is a true microcosm, collecting and combining all the best versions of the gifts of nature into one single country. The people, crops, cattle and metals that Italy produces are proof of nature's empire (*principatum*). Pliny seems to suggest two things: first, that Italy is the rightful inheritor of nature's empire, and second, that Italy's dominance is a natural occurrence. Italy's natural qualities make her the rightful ruler over the rest of the world. Italy's empire could, for example, change the Chauci's way of living for the better. They do not possess the things that demonstrate nature's empire in any way. They are, therefore, not fit to rule the world or even themselves. Only subjugation to Italy's empire could absolve them from their 'punishment of fortune' (*HN* 16.4), because it would give them access to the gifts of nature that grow in the more habitable places of the world. Pliny substantiates this point in *HN* 14.2, in a way that could have been inscribed on the face of the Ara Pacis:

Quis enim non communicato orbe terrarum maiestate Romani imperii profecisse vitam putet commercio rerum ac societate festae pacis, omniaque etiam quae ante occulta fuerant in promiscuo usu facta?

For who would not think that life has made progress in the commerce of things and in union with joyful peace, now that the majesty of the Roman empire has established communication between all lands, and made all things that were hidden before accessible for common use?

Here, Pliny argues that the Roman empire has made life better for everyone by establishing peace and opening access to goods from all over the world.¹⁰³ Even the edges of the world are now able

¹⁰¹ Cf. *totiusque naturae capacis* (*HN* 2.190) and my discussion of this passage in the introduction.

¹⁰² Cf. *salve, magna parens frugum* (*G.* 2.173).

¹⁰³ Saller argues that Rome's conquest and undisturbed trade during the Pax Romana had opened the way to the discovery of new goods from all over the world, allowing Pliny to compose an unprecedentedly comprehensive inventory of things in nature that are worth knowing. According to him the underlying principle here is essentially 'Smithian'. Certain parts of the empire had a comparative advantage in producing certain resources, which meant that trade in those resources could improve the standard of living on all sides. Saller, *Pliny's Roman Economy*, 49-

to enjoy the gifts of nature from the more habitable places. In this way, Pliny would argue that Italy has gained a natural right to conquer these lands and their people; to make them join in harmony with nature.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the expansion of Italy's empire is necessary for the welfare of the 'miserable', such as the Chauci, and for the proper distribution of the gifts of nature over the world.

Even mines are part of Italy's perfect microcosm. First of all, the animals are harmless (*innocentia animalium*), which means that there are no serpents lurking in the depths with which nature protects herself. Second, Pliny praises Italy for the quality of her metals, suggesting that their exploitation is a cause for pride, contrary to what we would expect from his diatribes against luxury. His apparent praise of these 'criminal' valuables fits the tendency of his concluding remarks. Pliny concludes his work with a critical assessment of the value of the products of nature, even those that are obtained through mining: "Of the things themselves, of those that come from the sea, pearls are the most valuable; from the earth's exterior, crystals, from the interior, diamond, emeralds, gemstones and murine vessels" (*Rerum autem ipsarum maximum est pretium in mari nascentium margaritis; extra tellurem crystallis, intra adamanti, smaragdis, gemmis, myrrinis, HN 37.204*). Gold and silver only take tenth and twentieth place in the list of valuables (*auro [...] decimum vix esse in pretio locum, argento [...] paene vicesimum*). Pliny's list of luxuries shows once more that his work is intended for the exploitation of nature by humanity. The list demonstrates that Italy provides the best options for the exploitation of the earth. Rather than gemstones, she produces the best versions of things that are truly valuable for life, such as crops, animals, arts and knowledge. If the need arises, she has some of the best products from the earth's interior, but only those that come low on the list of valuables. In this way, Pliny is able to put mining in Italy into perspective, keeping it as a part of Italy's harmonious relation with nature.

Pliny makes this harmonious relation in the context of mining explicit in book 36 with a remarkable example: "Among the many other marvels of Italy herself [...] the quarrymen also assert that the scars of the mountains fill up by themselves. If these marvels are true, there is hope that luxury will never lack [marble]" (*inter plurima alia Italiae ipsius miracula [...] exemptores quoque adfirmant compleri sponte illa montium ulcera. Quae si vera sunt, spes est numquam defutura luxuriae, HN 36.125*). Pliny's hope for the future of luxury is inconsistent to say the least. According to his condemnation of mining and quarrying in books 33 and 36, the scars on

50. It should be noted that in such passages Pliny rather explicitly intertwines his own encyclopedic endeavor with Rome's imperialism. The *vita* that the Roman empire has improved is just as much the *vita* of Pliny's preface (*Pref.* 12-13), the topic of his work. The Roman empire has allowed Pliny to discuss 'life' from all over the world, as it expands and discovers new lands. At the same time, Pliny's work allows the Roman empire to subjugate its territories by providing control over the representation of different cultures and natural phenomena. The Stoic ideal of *commercium* had already been applied to the government of the Roman empire by Cicero in *De Officiis*. Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal*, 25 n. 77.

¹⁰⁴ In book seven, on man, Pliny says that nature made some peoples for herself as a toy and for the Romans as a marvelous thing (*Haec atque talia ex hominum genere ludibria sibi, nobis miracula, ingeniosa fecit natura, HN 7.32*). Now that the parallel between the empires of nature and Italy has been established, it becomes clear that Pliny considers some peoples as a toy for Italy as well. The point here is that Rome gains natural dominance over the world in every way. He devalues other non-Roman people in such a way that they become objects to be treated by the Roman conqueror in any way he pleases. In *HN 18.5*, after having discussed violent people, he considers them to be "brambles of mankind" that deserve to be burned (*relictis exustioni suae istis hominum rubis pergemus excolere vitam*). As I pointed out in chapter one, Pliny considers the removal of brambles to be a good thing for nature (*HN 17.96*). In short, Pliny argues that the subjugation or extermination of some is natural and proper. Pliny's rhetoric is, therefore, unapologetically violent towards the 'other'.

the body of mother earth should be a sign of abuse. Reitz rightly notes that the anatomical language applied to nature in *HN* 36.1 (*telluris viscera*), which he employs to stress humanity's violation of the earth, "is picked up and overwritten in this passage." These scars in Italy heal by themselves, whereas elsewhere quarriers cause irreparable damage. Reitz argues that this marvel of Italy matches and justifies the many man-made *mirabilia* and *miracula* of Rome and Italy. In Italy, nature's cooperative stance provides at least some justification for the exploitation of marble.¹⁰⁵ I would add that nature does not seem to be affected by the abuse of quarriers in this case, because she accepts Italy as co-parent of the world. It appears that in Pliny's view, Italy's rulership deserves an appropriate amount of luxury if nature herself is willing to satisfy the demand.

Mastermind of the World

If the second mother of the world has Italy as her body, she has the Romans as her mind. Pliny says that the gods "have given the Romans to mankind as a second sun" (*adeo Romanos velut alteram lucem dedisse rebus humanis videntur, HN* 27.3). The Stoics believed that the sun was the embodiment of divine rationality of the world. Pliny calls the sun the "the soul and, more simply, the mind of the whole world, the principal rule and divine power of nature" (*mundi totius animum ac planius mentem, hunc principale naturae regimen ac numen, HN* 2.13).¹⁰⁶ Pliny bestows the title of 'sun' upon the Romans, because the Pax Romana has given access to goods from lands all over the world.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Pliny equates them to the sun, the mastermind of the world in Stoic thought, like he equated Italy to mother nature. He identifies the Romans as the ultimate source of human benefits, because they control the distribution of nature's gifts across the empire.¹⁰⁸ This aspect of Roman control comes to the forefront again in book 36, as Pliny zooms in on the buildings of the city of Rome (*HN* 36.101):

Verum et ad urbis nostrae miracula transire conveniat DCCCque annorum dociles scrutari vires et sic quoque terrarum orbem victum ostendere. Quod accidisse totiens paene, quot referentur miracula, apparebit; universitate vero acervata et in quendam unum cumulum coiecta non alia magnitudo exurget quam si mundus alius quidam in uno loco narretur.

¹⁰⁵ Reitz, "Nature's Helping Hand," 131-132. Reitz argues that Pliny protects individual buildings from the charge of luxury by putting stress on their usefulness. In his list of the most high-profile engineering achievements of the Roman empire (*HN* 36.121) he includes aqueducts, harbors, roads and channels, which are praiseworthy on account of their undisputable usefulness. Nature's cooperative stance towards quarrying provides a more general justification for the use of marble in buildings.

¹⁰⁶ Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal*, 25-26.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Romana pacis maiestate* [...] *herbas quoque invicem ostentante (HN* 27.3).

¹⁰⁸ Mary Beagon, "Labores Pro Bono Publico: The Burdensome Mission of Pliny's *Natural History*," in *Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, eds. Jason König and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 97. Jones-Lewis argues that poison in particular endorses Roman control. Since poison can either be a danger or a benefit (in medicine) to society depending on those who wield it, nature demands that Italy rules the world as the responsible imperialist actor that she is. Jones-Lewis, Molly Ayn. "Poison: Nature's Argument for the Roman Empire in Pliny the Elder's 'Naturalis Historia'." *The Classical World* 106 no.1 (2012): 71. I think that Roman control is endorsed in more obvious ways too, as the following passage shows, but Pliny's treatment of elements such as poison certainly support this endorsement.

But it would be appropriate to continue with the wonders of our city and to examine the powers we have channelled in 800 years and in this way to present the world which we have conquered as well. Which will appear to have happened almost as many times as the wonders that I will report. In fact, the entirety of it piled up and thrown onto one heap will result in a towering greatness that would not be different from another world described in one single place.

Pliny's language here is concise and, at the same time, somewhat superfluous. Why would we need to pile up the entirety of Rome to understand his point, when the city itself is already in a single place? The powers (*vires*) Pliny refers to must include impressive buildings, *miracula*, because he proceeds to describe costly Roman construction projects that overshadowed the greatest monuments in the world.¹⁰⁹ Pliny's point is, however, that Rome itself is a microcosm of nature. The buildings of the city present the world that it has conquered in 800 years, and, heaped up, appear to be another world by themselves. Rome has made her world *docilis*, like nature wants humanity not to be *indocilis*.¹¹⁰ The city has become a microcosm of the perfect microcosm that is Italy. Rome has channelled the powers of the world into one single place, which houses the mind and rule of an empire.

A remarkable passage from book 12, on trees, shows that Pliny means the natural world as much as the human world. He says the following about the import of balsam trees from Judaea: "Emperors Vespasian and Titus displayed this variety of trees to the city, and it is brilliant to say that from the time of Pompey the Great we have led trees in triumph. This tree now serves Rome and pays tribute together with its people" (*Ostendere arborum hanc urbi imperatores Vespasiani, clarumque dictu, a Pompeio Magno in triumpho arbores quoque duximus. Servit nunc haec ac tributa pendit cum sua gente, HN 12.111*). Rome has conquered the nature of Judaea just as much as it has conquered her people. The dedicatee of the encyclopedia himself, the future emperor Titus, has added to the microcosm of Rome through conquest. We are reminded of nature's happiness under the plough of the triumphant farmer-general (*triumphali aratore, HN 18.19*). Nature does not seem to mind her defeat by Titus, because she pays tribute to her conqueror. The balsam-tree now adds to the abundance (*varietas*) of nature's microcosm in Rome.

Sorcha Carey notes that Pliny's 'world described in one single place' could equally refer to his own work. Pliny narrates the world in one place and places the world in Rome. She argues that Pliny's image of Rome as another world is "at once a statement of the greatness and glory of her buildings, and an expression of the overriding concern of Pliny's work – to describe the world as Roman and to situate the world in Rome." Rome is, therefore, a microcosm of the world external to Pliny's work and a microcosm of the world which is Pliny's text.¹¹¹ Rome is the concretization of nature in Pliny's work. The *HN*, in which Pliny turns up as Rome's agent and heralds her greatness, becomes a reflection nature herself. In *HN* 2.160 he reckons among

¹⁰⁹ He says, for example, that "we admire the pyramids of kings, when Caesar paid 100.000.000 sesterces for the ground alone on which he built his forum" (*pyramidas regum miramur, cum solum tantum foro exstruendo HS [M] Caesar dictator emerit, HN 36.103*). In Pliny's view, Caesar's dazzling expense by itself compares to the Egyptian pyramids.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *non tamen indociles natura nos esse voluit (HN 17.32)*. *Docilis* translates to 'easily taught' or 'docile', but I used 'channelled' in my translation since it goes better with *vires* in meaning.

¹¹¹ Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture*, 100.

the crimes of our “ungrateful souls” that “we are ignorant of the earth’s nature” (*Inter crimina ingrati animi et hoc duxerim quod naturam eius ignoramus*). In his work, then, he takes it upon himself to educate humanity.¹¹² He teaches the signs and laws of nature, and tries to warn against avarice and luxury, just like nature herself does. He civilizes too, like the second mother of the world. He aims to wash away the ‘crime of ignorance’ and draws lines between ‘miserable people’ on the edges of nature and people in the middle who enjoy the gifts of nature to the fullest. In his work, he even imitates nature by following the *scala naturae* in the order of his chapters.

At the same time, nature and Rome remain two different entities. The two reflect one another, but remain separate. On the one hand, Rome reflects nature in her buildings and the vastness of her empire, on the other hand, nature reflects Rome in her maternal role and moral values. This separation, ‘purification’, between the two is essential in establishing a hierarchy between humanity and nature. This hierarchy is necessary for Rome, as the peak of human civilization, in maintaining control over nature and her goods. Pliny’s language, therefore, not only reinforces human social hierarchies, for example between mothers and sons, but also hierarchies between humans and the ‘nonhuman’ rest of nature. Pliny’s vision is shaped by a ‘self-serving social interest’, as Bookchin would put it, to protect the dominion of Rome over nature and the rest of humanity. He transcribes not only human dominion into the genetic code of nature as biologically immutable, but also the Roman empire.¹¹³ Pliny draws nature into a conversation about empire building in which he has already established arguments and drawn conclusions. Nature gains agency, Pliny animates her, but he also masterminds her every argument. Pliny’s work illustrates a potential problem with Latour’s actor-agency of the world’s phenomena. Nonhumans do not write, voice, or publish their own actions, but humans do. These interpretations of nonhuman agency may either be used for the benefit of nature and humanity together or for the benefit of a particularly human agenda. Whereas Pliny clearly chose for the benefit of an imperialist agenda, the UN may still decide between the economy or the environment.

Conclusion

Rome, like Pliny, has made nature ‘sterile’. She is conquered, under control and serves the benefit of the Roman empire. Nature has yielded her likeness to the city and together with the Romans she takes care of mankind as a mother. In the *HN*, nature is man-made, meaning that she is made by men, built and written into the microcosms that are Rome and the *HN*, and that she is made into a human figure. In this chapter, I have shown that Pliny presents Italy as a second mother to the world, on a par with nature, with the Romans as her guiding intellectual force. Italy, with Rome as her centre, is a ‘natural empire’. She is a microcosm that houses all the elements that demonstrate nature’s empire. Rome functions as a second moral authority to the world. She has internalized the ruling principles of mother nature, she educates, civilizes and, through conquest, opens up access to people on all sides of the world. The Pax Romana

¹¹² In particular, he writes for “the humble mob of farmers and artisans, and then for unoccupied students” (*humili vulgo scripta sunt, agricolarum, opificum turbae, denique studiorum otiosis, HN Pref.6*). The first are also the most likely to be taught by nature herself, on the field or working with raw materials.

¹¹³ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 27.

allows for the commerce of goods across the empire, which, according to Pliny, increases the welfare of people all over the world. Even mining, a practice fuelled by greed, is put into perspective. Mother nature satisfies a demand for luxury that is proper to an empire which reflects her own person.

Pliny's work is a microcosm that demonstrates the empire of Rome through the empire of nature. Pliny assumes the role of nature to educate and civilize his readers. At the same time, he aims to create a hierarchy between nature, her goods and peoples, and Rome. He hacks the dominion of Rome into the genetic code of nature. Mother nature's care of and her struggles with mankind serve one purpose in the *HN*, to promote Rome as the natural ruler of the world.

Conclusion

Like the visitor of the Ara Pacis exits the altar between the panels of Tellus and Rome, I have tried to walk the crossroads between nature and culture in the *HN*. In the *HN*, mother nature figures as a recurring character who brings nature and mankind together. Interaction between nature and mankind is at its most intimate in examples of farming and mining, which have been the focus of this thesis. In the context of farming, mother nature acts as the ideal Roman mother. She takes personal care of her children, nourishes, and educates them. She teaches them a life of high moral standing and raises them into skilled farmers. Mother nature is happy under the yoke of the responsible farmer-general. Through foresight and kindness, she dedicates her entire being to the life of mankind. Her children repay her by keeping her healthy and adding to her already abundant gifts. However, weaknesses in the relationship between nature and mankind become evident in the context of mining. The responsible farmer-general is mirrored by the irresponsible miner-general. Nature's education becomes a matter of desperation. She has to protect herself from the violence of the miner-general while trying to teach him lessons in greed. Pliny, adding insult to injury, endows the earth with a body. The human immune system does not only remove festering bramble bushes but goes into overdrive. The miner-general eats away at her exposed body and reaches into her bowels. Pliny makes the harm that is done to the earth viscerally recognizable. The subjugation of mother earth is now a sign of moral decline, rather than the successful outcome of her moral teachings.

Pliny shows awareness of the environment. He communicates his awareness to the reader by transforming nature into a moral actor. In this way, he connects the human and the nonhuman and brings them together in conversation. He, however, controls the conversation. Pliny, and the Roman empire with him, control the exposure, representation, and proper use of nature. He guides the conversation towards the conclusion that Italy and the Roman people are a second mother to the world. In Pliny's view, Italy and Rome are microcosms of nature which control the distribution of goods across the empire. Their empire is natural and comes to the benefit of the 'miserable' people on the edges of the world. Nature helps the empire by even satisfying a demand for luxury in Rome. Pliny's work itself functions as a microcosm of nature. It aims to present a complete picture of its research subject and, as a mother, it aims to educate and civilize. Pliny is, therefore, not an environmentalist, because he is not concerned with the environment by itself. On the one hand, nature is a gift, a tool or even a curiosity to mankind, but on the other hand, she is a reflection of it. In her reflection, Pliny sees the Romans as natural rulers of the world. To him, nature is a marvellous thing, but in the end, she functions merely as a green screen on which to project an imperialist picture.

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