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Ritual Practice and Ecology in Pliny the Elder

The elder Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* opens with a paean to his chosen subject of inquiry (2.1-2). *Natura* is eternal, immeasurable, never born and never to die. This conception represents a new formulation: by incorporating the notion of god into material nature, Pliny excludes any opportunity for transcendence into an unknowable area of the divine (Beagon, *Roman Nature* 26-33). This talk focuses on this particular aspect of Pliny's conception of nature to offer insight into his characterization of medical and religious ritual. I remark along the way on Pliny's relationship with contemporary investigations into human objectivity (Bourdieu) and ecological theory (Abram).

I begin with two specific ritual practices: 1) the power of the word; 2) the working of the body. Pliny records numerous examples of ritual action based on "verbal homeopathy:" for example, eating a rabbit (*lepus*) can lend one *lepos*, urbane elegance (28.260; *AJP* 1927). More complicated are those cures that succeed through the verbal manipulation of the natural world. The venereal disease crabs (*carcinoma*) is named from its resemblance to the sea creature, which can in turn be used to cure the disease (32.134). In this particular case we observe human beings directly intervening to create "natural" relationships. I situate this practice in the grammatical theory of writers such as Nigidius Figulus, for whom "nouns and verbs arose not by chance assignment, but by a kind of *natural* force and reason" (Gell. 10.4.1). This relationship between nature and language reflects current influential theory in ecology, whereby "spoken language seems to give voice to, and thus to enhance and accentuate, the sensorial affinity between humans and the environing earth" (Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous* 71).

"Sensorial affinity" is further manifested in how the human body does ritual work. Pliny attests clearly to the power of body technique in ritual: "It is obvious that religious observation has power even when it is silent" (28.24). After discussing the precise role of gesture in furthering the goal of prayer and incantation (paying particular attention to apotropaic prayer and binding ritual in medicine), I conclude with an unremarked feature of Pliny's opus: unlike "wise men" in most traditional societies, who use secret knowledge to empower themselves as mediators between their own communities and the divine, Pliny displays an extraordinary willingness to share knowledge with his readers. This is, I claim, because Pliny does not posit nature as a transcendent power outside the observable world. Several other aspects of Pliny's work depend on nature being a manipulable, structuring structure. Successful ritual in Pliny must be entirely in and of this world. In thus freeing ritual from both a divinity transcendent of human activity and a practitioner separate from society, Pliny situates practice as beyond objectification (cf. Bourdieu, *Logic* 18-10). In Pliny's all-natural world, human beings and the more-than-human happily interact.