The Natural History of Pliny, Volume 1 (of 6)

the Elder Pliny

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Transcriber’s notes:

Italic text is denoted _thus_.

The spelling, hyphenation, punctuation and accentuation are as the original, except for apparent typographical errors which have been corrected.

In footnote 3897:—
See B. ii. c. 116.
corrected to read:—
See B. ii. c. 110.

In footnote 4348:— A king of ... see B. xvi. c. 89 of the present Book. is incorrect, as B. xvi is to be found in Vol. III.

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PLINY’S

NATURAL HISTORY.

THE

NATURAL HISTORY

OF

PLINY.

TRANSLATED,

WITH COPIOUS NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

BY THE LATE

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AND

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PREFACE

The only translation of PLINY'S NATURAL HISTORY which has hitherto appeared in the English language is that by Philemon Holland, published in the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth. It is no disparagement to Holland's merits, as a diligent and generally faithful translator, to say that his work is unsuited to the requirements of the nineteenth century.

In the present translation, the principal editions of Pliny have been carefully consulted, and no pains have been spared, as a reference to the Notes will show, to present to the reader the labours of recent Commentators, among whom stands pre-eminent the celebrated Cuvier. It has been a primary object to bring to the illustration of the work whatever was afforded by the progress of knowledge and modern discoveries in science and art. Without ample illustration, Pliny's valuable work would want much of the interest which belongs to it, and present difficulties scarcely surmountable by any one who has not made the Author his especial study.

In the first two Books, the text of Hardouin, as given in Lemaire's edition (Paris, 1827), has been followed; in the remainder that of Sillig (Gotha, 1851-3), excepting in some few instances, where, for reasons given in the Notes, it has been deemed advisable to depart

from it. The first two Books, and portions of others, are the performance of the late Dr. Bostock, who contemplated a translation of the entire work; but, unfortunately for the interests of science, he was not permitted to carry his design into execution.

Upwards of a hundred pages had been printed off before the present Translator entered on his duties; and as they had not the advantage of Dr. Bostock's superintendence through the press, some trifling oversights have occurred. These are, for the most part, corrected in a short Appendix.

THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF PLINY.

Caius Plinius Secundus was born either at Verona or Novum Comum[1], now Como, in Cisalpine Gaul, in the year A.U.C. 776, and A.D. 23. It is supposed that his earlier years were spent in his native province; and that he was still a youth when he removed to Rome, and attended the lectures of the grammarian Apion. It was in about his sixteenth year that he there saw Lollia Paulina[2], as in the following she was divorced by Caligula, and it was probably in his twentieth that he witnessed the capture of a large fish at Ostia, by Claudius and his attendants[3], and in his twenty-second that he visited Africa[4], Egypt, and Greece.

In his twenty-third year Pliny served in Germany under the legatus Pomponius Secundus, whose friendship he soon acquired, and was in consequence promoted to the command of an _ala_, or troop of cavalry. During his military career he wrote a treatise (now lost) "On the Use of the Javelin by Cavalry," and travelled over that country[5] as far as the shores of the German Ocean, besides visiting Belgic

Gaul. In his twenty-ninth year he returned to Rome, and applied himself for a time to forensic pursuits, which however he appears soon to have abandoned. About this time he wrote the life of his friend Pomponius, and an account of the “Wars in Germany,” in twenty books, neither of which are extant. Though employed in writing a continuation of the “Roman History” of Aufidius Bassus, from the time of Tiberius, he judiciously suspended its publication during the reign of Nero, who appointed him his procurator in Nearer Spain, and not improbably honoured him with equestrian rank. It was during his sojourn in Spain that the death of his brother-in-law, C. Cæcilius, left his nephew C. Plinius Cæcilius Secundus (the author of the Letters) an orphan; whom immediately upon his return to Rome, A.D. 70, he adopted, receiving him and his widowed mother under his roof.

Having been previously known to Vespasian in the German wars, he was admitted into the number of his most intimate friends, and obtained an appointment at court, the nature of which is not known, but Rezzonico conjectures that it was in connexion with the imperial treasury. Though Pliny was on intimate terms also with Titus, to whom he dedicated his Natural History, there is little ground for the assertion, sometimes made, that he served under him in the Jewish wars. His account of Palestine clearly shows that he had never visited that country. It was at this period that he published his Continuation of the History of Aufidius Bassus.

From the titles which he gives to Titus in the dedicatory preface, it is pretty clear that his Natural History was published A.D. 77, two years before his death.

In A.D. 73 or 74, he had been appointed by Vespasian præfect of the Roman fleet at Misenum, on the western coast of Italy. It was to this elevation that he owed his romantic death, somewhat similar, it has been remarked, to that of Empedocles, who perished in the crater of Mount Ætna. The closing scene of his active life, simultaneously with the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii, cannot be better described than in the language employed by his nephew in an Epistle to his friend Tacitus the historian[6]:—"My uncle was at Misenum, where he was in personal command of the fleet. On the ninth[7] day before the calends of September, at about the seventh hour, 1 P.M., my mother, observing the appearance of a cloud of unusual size and shape, mentioned it to him. After reclining in the sun he had taken his cold bath; he had then again lain down and, after a slight repast, applied himself to his studies. Immediately upon hearing this, he called for his shoes, and ascended a spot from which he could more easily observe this remarkable phænomenon. The cloud was to be seen gradually rising upwards; though, from the great distance, it was uncertain from which of the mountains it arose; it was afterwards, however, ascertained to be Vesuvius. In appearance and shape it strongly resembled a tree; perhaps it was more like a pine than anything else, with a stem of enormous length reaching upwards to the heavens, and then spreading out in a number of branches in every direction. I have little doubt that either it had been carried upwards by a violent gust of wind, and that the wind dying away, it had lost its compactness, or else, that being overcome by its own weight, it had decreased in density and become extended over a large surface: at one moment it was white, at another dingy and spotted, just as it was more or less charged with earth or with ashes.

“To a man so eager as he was in the pursuit of knowledge, this appeared to be a most singular phænomenon, and one that deserved to be viewed more closely; accordingly he gave orders for a light Liburnian vessel to be got ready, and left it at my option to accompany him. To this however I made answer, that I should prefer continuing my studies; and as it so happened, he himself had just given me something to write. Taking his tablets with him, he left the house. The sailors stationed at Retina, alarmed at the imminence of the danger—for the village lay at the foot of the mountain, and the sole escape was by sea—sent to entreat his assistance in rescuing them from this frightful peril. Upon this he instantly changed his plans, and what he had already begun from a desire for knowledge, he determined to carry out as a matter of duty. He had the gallies put to sea at once, and went on board himself, with the intention of rendering assistance, not only to Retina, but to many other places as well; for the whole of this charming coast was thickly populated. Accordingly he made all possible haste towards the spot, from which others were flying, and steered straight onwards into the very midst of the danger: so far indeed was he from every sensation of fear, that he remarked and had noted down every movement and every change that was to be observed in the appearance of this ominous eruption. The ashes were now falling fast upon the vessels, hotter and more and more thickly the nearer they approached the shore; showers of pumice too, intermingled with black stones, calcined and broken by the action of the flames: the sea suddenly retreated from the shore, where the debris of the mountain rendered landing quite impossible. After hesitating for a moment whether or not to turn back, upon the pilot strongly advising him to do so:—“Fortune favours the bold[8],”

said he, “conduct me to Pomponianus.” Pomponianus was then at Stabiæ, a place that lay on the other side of the bay, for in those parts the shores are winding, and as they gradually trend away, the sea forms a number of little creeks. At this spot the danger at present was not imminent, but still it could be seen, and as it appeared to be approaching nearer and nearer, Pomponianus had ordered his baggage on board the ships, determined to take to flight, if the wind, which happened to be blowing the other way, should chance to lull. The wind, being in this quarter, was extremely favourable to his passage, and my uncle soon arriving at Stabiæ, embraced his anxious friend, and did his best to restore his courage; and the better to re-assure him by evidence of his own sense of their safety, he requested the servants to conduct him to the bath. After bathing he took his place at table, and dined, and that too in high spirits, or at all events, what equally shows his strength of mind, with every outward appearance of being so. In the mean time vast sheets of flame and large bodies of fire were to be seen arising from Mount Vesuvius; the glare and brilliancy of which were beheld in bolder relief as the shades of night came on apace. My uncle however, in order to calm their fears, persisted in saying that this was only the light given by some villages which had been abandoned by the rustics in their alarm to the flames: after which he retired to rest, and soon fell fast asleep: for his respiration, which with him was heavy and loud, in consequence of his corpulence, was distinctly heard by the servants who were keeping watch at the door of the apartment. The courtyard which led to his apartment had now become filled with cinders and pumice-stones, to such a degree, that if he had remained any longer in the room, it would have been quite impossible for him to leave it. On being awoke

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