

A MISE EN SCÈNE OF ‘PAGAN PESSIMISM’
IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY:
BOOK 7 OF PLINY’S *NATURALIS HISTORIA*
IN JOHANNES OF HAUVILLA’S *ARCHITRENIUS*

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ABSTRACT · Accounts of the fortune of Pliny’s *Natural History* in the Middle Ages focus on its impact on the resurgent interest in the natural sciences and on the partially related *mirabilia* tradition. Knowledge of the strongly pessimistic anthropology and of the related ‘stepmother Nature dilemma’ that Pliny sketches at the beginning of Book 7 of his *Natural History* very rarely surfaces in medieval literature and invariably under the sign of doctrinal correction. The Twelfth-Century Latin poem *Architrenius* by Johannes of Hauvilla, whose protagonist roams the world in order to quarrel with Nature about the misery of the human condition, might be a significant exception. We analyze the impact on the *Architrenius* of the pessimistic description of the human condition in Plin., *nat.*, 7, 1-5, arguing that its use in Johannes’ poem represents a *unicum* in Twelfth-Century culture.

KEYWORDS · Pliny The Elder, *Natural History*, Stepmother Nature, *Architrenius*, Twelfth-Century Poetry.

THE fortune of Pliny’s *Natural History* in the Middle Ages is still largely under-explored.¹ The extant scholarship focuses almost exclusively on two aspects: the impact of the naturalistic character of Pliny’s monumental encyclopedia, which more than often is connected to the resurgent interest among Christian

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¹ The most extensive study to-date is ARNO BORST, *Das Buch der Naturgeschichte. Plinius und seine Leser im Zeitalter des Pergaments*, Heidelberg, Winter, 1994. See also MARJORIE CHIBNALL, *Pliny’s Natural History and the Middle Ages, Empire and Aftermath. Silver Latin II*, edited by Thomas A. Dorey, London, Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1975, pp. 57-78; FRANCESCA ROMANA BERNO, *Plinius d. Ä. (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus maior). Naturalis Historia*, in *Die Rezeption der antiken Literatur. Kulturhistorisches Werklexikon*, edited by Christine Walde, Stuttgart, Weimar, 2010, pp. 697-726 («Der Neue Pauly», Supplemente 7). AUDE DOODY, *Pliny’s Encyclopedia: The Reception of the Natural History*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, ignores the medieval period. Some studies on particular aspects of Pliny’s medieval fortune are the following: FRANCESCO STELLA, *Ludibria sibi, nobis miracula. La fortuna medievale della scienza pliniana e l’antropologia della diversitas*, in *La Naturalis Historia di Plinio nella tradizione medievale e umanistica*, edited by Vanna Maraglino, Bari, Cacucci, 2012, pp. 39-75; CHRISTIAN ROHR, *Von Plinius zu Isidor und Beda Venerabilis. Zur Übernahme antiken Wissens über Witterungsphänomene im Mittelalter*, in *Exzerpieren - Kompilieren - Tradieren. Transformationen des Wissens zwischen Spätantike und Frühmittelalter*, edited by Stephan Dusil, Gerald Schwedler, Raphael Schwitter, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 49-67.