

# Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*

Special Collections featured item for December 2011  
by Helen Westthrop, UMASCS Library Assistant.

**Caii Plynii Secundi Naturalis historiae libri tricesimiseptimi et ultimi finis impressi.  
Venetiis : Per Nicolaum Jenson Gallicum, 1472.**

**Item from the Cole Library COLE--X427F (Grille Collection), University of Reading  
Special Collections Services.**



Gaius Plinius Secundus the Elder (Pliny the Elder) was born in AD 23, and came from Transpadane Gaul. He was born into a family of the municipal governing class, and was active in military duties, and played a part in victorious conquests in the Roman legions in Germany, Spain and Gaul. The Roman Emperor Vespasian sent him to Spain, where he was in charge of the treasury, and while he was there his brother-in-law died and Pliny adopted his son Pliny the Younger.

*Pliny the Elder: an imaginative nineteenth century portrait. No contemporary depiction of Pliny has survived.*

Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* (Natural History) is a vast encyclopaedic work and the only book by him to have survived. This extraordinary work was originally composed and written in classical Latin around AD 70, and was divided into thirty-seven books. It is very broad in scope and includes all sorts of facts, observations and myths

pertaining to the world and man, on subjects such as astronomy, beekeeping, taxidermy and conception. It has been described as one of the most popular texts ever printed, and might be considered the Wikipedia of its day, drawing together knowledge from various sources and presenting a starting point for those requiring information on a wide range of subjects.



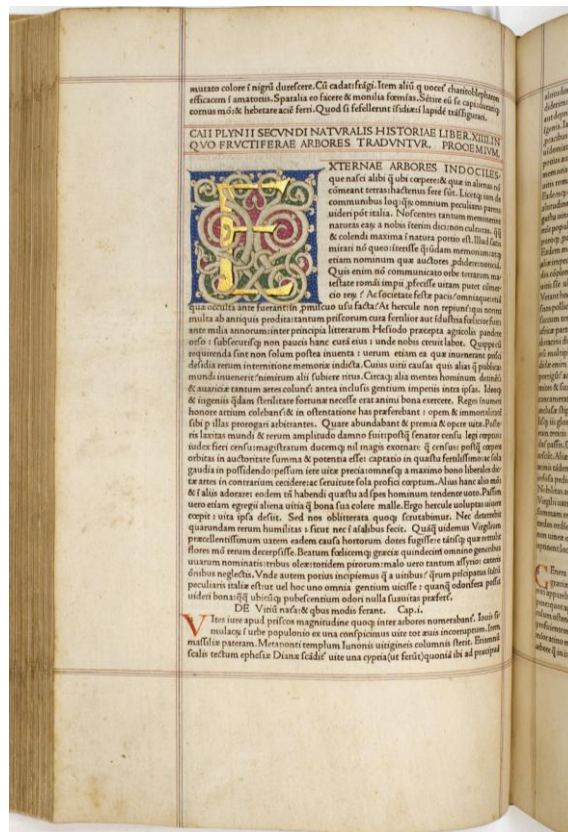
The illuminated page from the University of Reading's copy of the 1472 edition of Pliny's Historia Naturalis. This page is the beginning of Book 2 on the nature of the world, the elements, and the universe and its planets



*Beginning of Book 10, on the nature of birds, including the ostrich, the phoenix and the eagle, from the University of Reading's copy of the 1472 edition of Pliny's Historia Naturalis, with a detail of the illuminated initial.*

Although it is now known that much of Pliny's information is factually inaccurate, it does depict the world as it was known in Pliny's time. The text includes anecdotal information on subjects such as determining the sex of an unborn child. For example, Pliny writes about Livia, Nero's wife, who was expecting a baby and eager to have a boy. She nursed a hen's egg in her warm bosom, and when it hatched it was a male chick which reassured her that she would have a son. This turned out to be accurate, when she gave birth in 42 BC to the future Emperor Tiberius.



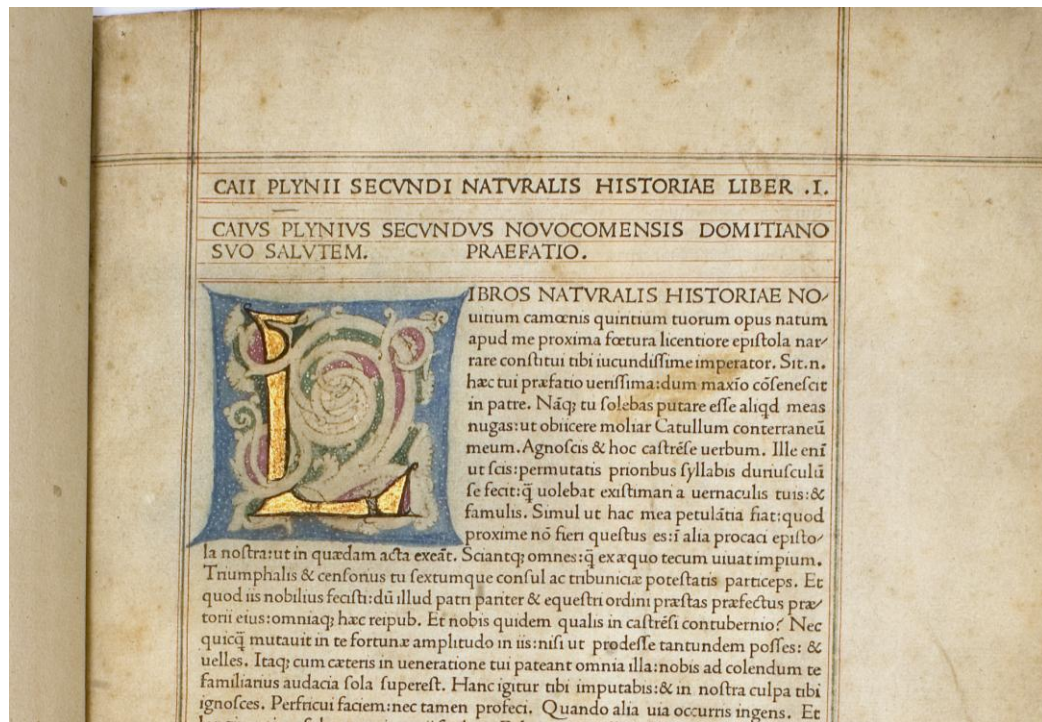


*The beginning of Book 14 on the subject of trees and vines from the 1472 edition of Pliny's  
Historia Naturalis*

Pliny intended his work for popular use rather than specialist scholars. However, the text became the foundation of many other early natural history works, such as the encyclopaedias of Gesner and Bartholomaeus Anglicus. Pliny's masterpiece had been well-regarded throughout the Middle Ages as the chief authority on science, and played an important role in the development of scientific thought in both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In the Renaissance period, the sections on the arts were of particular interest, and humanist authors such as Petrarch and Boccaccio are known to have read Pliny's work. The text continues to be of significance today as the only contemporary account of ancient art to have survived. It is thought that there were over 20,000 subjects mentioned, 2000 volumes researched and the works of at least 100 or as many as 500 authors consulted during Pliny's research.

Pliny the Elder died in AD 79 at Stabiae, after succumbing to the poisonous fumes of the erupting Vesuvius. He had been visiting the area to view and document the volcanic activity, when the lava from the eruption covered the city and the house

where he had been staying. The eruption and subsequent lava flow also caused the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii.



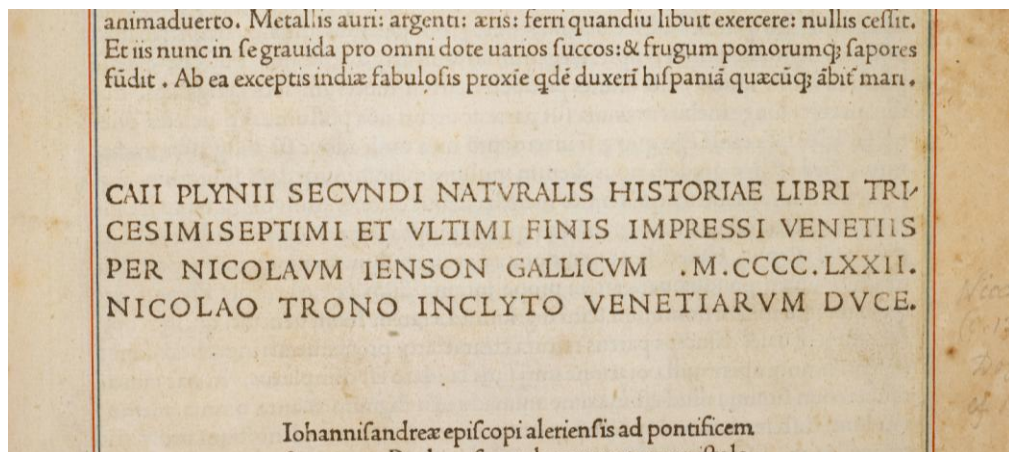
*The beginning of the preface on the first page of the 1472 edition of Pliny's Historia Naturalis*

The 1472 edition of Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* is the second oldest printed book in the University of Reading's rare book collections, and one of twelve examples of incunabula or early printed books held by the University. The Reading copy of *Historia Naturalis* has one illuminated page and thirty-seven illuminated initial letters, and is rubricated in red and blue around text. The illumination would have been added by hand after printing, depending on what the purchaser could afford. The book was printed in Venice by Nicholas Jenson (c. 1420-1480), an influential type founder, punch cutter, printer and publisher, and is one of the finest examples of printing from the Renaissance period.



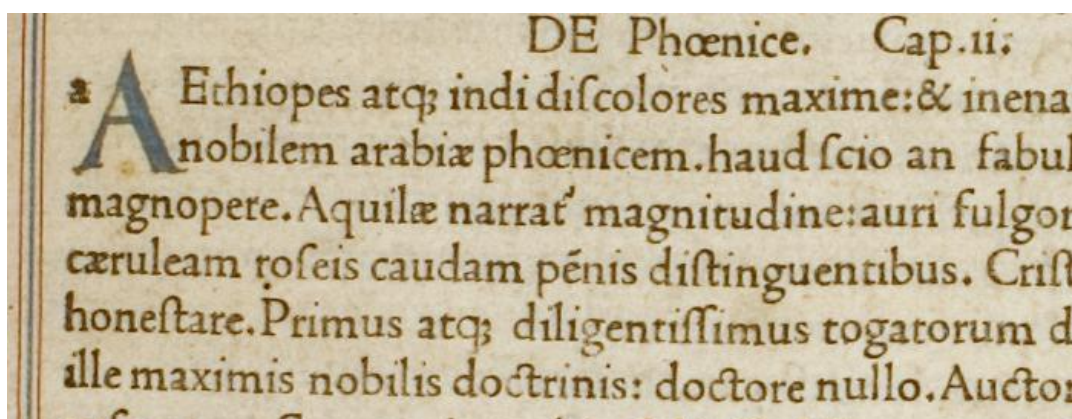
*Portrait of Nicholas Jenson*

Jenson's edition was the third edition of Pliny's work to be printed. This edition is particularly notable for the beauty and clarity of its typeface and page layout, and for the eleven lavishly illuminated copies that are known to exist. Indeed, the writer Lilian Armstrong has commented that it "is often singled out as one of the most stunning books printed in the fifteenth century". Jenson was born in Sommevoire in France. He was the Master of the French Royal Mint, and was sent by Charles VII in 1458 to Germany to learn to be a printer. When Charles VII died in 1461, Jenson moved to Venice where he established his own printing business. He was noted for his use of roman type, which was modelled on the manuscript hand developed by the Renaissance humanists who stressed the importance of the study of ancient Latin texts.



*The colophon (in capital letters) at the end of the Historia Naturalis giving details of the name of the work, the author, the printer (Nicholas Jenson), the place of printing (Venice) and the date in Roman numerals (1472). In very early printed books such as this one, most of these particulars may not be found elsewhere as early printed books did not have title-pages.*





Detail of text from Book 10 on the phoenix from the 1472 edition of Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* showing Jenson's roman typeface

In the late nineteenth century, William Morris based his Golden Type for the Kelmscott Press on Jenson's roman type of 1470. Morris owned a copy of the *Historia Naturalis* printed by Jenson in 1476, which T.J. Cobden-Sanderson and Emery Walker also used when developing their typeface for the Doves Press and the famous Doves Press Bible (a copy of volume one of this publication is held in the University of Reading's rare book collections).

The University of Reading Special Collections hold a large number of other rare editions of Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, including editions dating from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, many of which are also held in the Cole Library collection of rare books on science and zoology.

### Further reading

- Armstrong, Lilian, 'The illustration of Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* in Venetian manuscripts and early printed books' in *Manuscripts in the fifty years after the invention of printing*, edited by J.B. Trapp. London : The Warburg Institute, 1983, pp. 97-105.
- Bettley, James, ed. *The art of the book : from medieval manuscript to graphic novel*. London : V&A Publications, 2001.

- French, Roger and Frank Greenaway. *Science in the early Roman Empire : Pliny the Elder : his sources and influence*. London : Croom Helm, 1986.
- Gudger, E.W. 'Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*. The most popular natural history ever published', *Isis*, v. 6, no. 3 (1924), pp. 269-281.
- Lowry, Martin. *Nicholas Jenson and the rise of Venetian publishing in Renaissance Europe*. Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1991.
- State Library of South Australia, 'Treasures of the State Library : Caii Plynii Secvndi Natvralis historiae'  
<http://www.samemory.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=968&c=3693> [accessed 11/10/11].



*Detail of an illuminated initial at the beginning of Book 14 from the University of Reading's copy of the 1472 edition of Pliny's Historia Naturalis*