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Divine Nature and the Natural Divine: The Marine Folklore of Pliny the Elder

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the depiction of the marine world and its mythical inhabitants in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder. Through an ecocritical reading of the text, whereby I consider Pliny's tendency to conceptualise Nature as a divinity and his consequential displacement of the traditionally anthropomorphic Greco-Roman gods, we can better understand the underlying factors in Pliny's selective inclusion of ideas. I argue that Pliny's divinisation of Nature, attributable to the influence of ancient Stoicism, has impacted his conception of the relationship between humans and Nature, an ideal centred around a post-anthropocentric framework. This, in turn, exerts a ripple effect onto the folkloric elements of the text. Both the anthropic figures of the sea (Nereids and Tritons) along with more bestial creatures (sea monsters) become dispossessed of traditionally divine attributes and associations with Poseidon/Neptune, leading to their representation in the *Natural History* as more 'naturalised' types of sea creatures.

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Introduction

Against the traditionally green backdrop, Steve Mentz's broad call for a 'blue cultural studies' has pointed towards the sea as a new avenue for ecocritical studies and a locus that has increasingly captured the attention of the humanities in the twenty-first century (2009a, 997). While shifting our attention in this spatial manner, Mentz's research on the sea in early modern literature also contains aspects of a temporal element, understanding Shakespeare's marine elements as being historically distinct from our modern conceptions that bear the influence of Romanticised strains of thought. He further designates the early modern period as the confluence point during which 'the sea's ancient status as alien-God space was rearticulated so that it also became a symbol of freedom' (2009b, 69). Crucially, it was not that the ancient and medieval thought patterns of the sea vanished in the early modern or later periods, but rather that they were supplemented by new associations. In this manner, for the early modern and modern periods, despite the fundamental shifts in maritime outlooks brought about by the Age of Exploration and new navigational technologies, there still endured elements of earlier ancient thought embedded, both unintentionally and deliberately, within marine literature. One ancient text which has exerted an

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extraordinary amount of influence on later literature of the sea is the *Natural History* of the Roman Pliny the Elder, a Latin text written in the late first century A.D. Mentz himself has already noted some instances of Pliny's influential ideas concerning the sea in prominent literary works like Shakespeare's *Othello* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (2009b, 30, 89), to which we may also add the ancient Roman's impression upon a formative work of marine science fiction, Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, where Pliny is mentioned for his reports of sea monsters ([1870] 2019, 7). Such references testify to the continuity and appeal of ancient Greco-Roman thought about the sea. Yet it would be misleading to cast Pliny as merely a representative of some singular and uniform ancient perspective on the sea. The debt of these modern literary works and others to Pliny warrants a closer ecocritical exploration of the nature of the *Natural History*, as does the text's unconventional perspective on the natural world. Such an examination will reveal that the ideas included in the *Natural History* about folkloric marine entities were actually somewhat dissonant with the general milieu of Greco-Roman antiquity. Nevertheless, the divinisation inherent in the designation of the ancient sea as an 'alien God-space' still holds merit, albeit with a radically different conception of divinity.

Pliny's *Natural History* is an encyclopaedic work comprised of thirty-seven volumes covering an exceptionally wide range of topics from the creation of the world, to meteorological phenomena, to accounts of various plants and animals. Pliny boasted in the preface to this massive undertaking that he, with help from others, had examined 2,000 earlier texts and that this completed work contained over 20,000 facts (*Natural History*, preface 17).¹ For classicists, this enormous collection provides a remarkable insight into contemporary Roman beliefs, apart from what is contained in the more traditional poetic genres, built upon literary flourishes and allusions to earlier poetry. Graham Anderson, one of the most prominent classical folklorists, has noted the importance of this encyclopaedic text to the study of ancient folklore in particular, remarking that it contains 'by far the largest amount of folkloric data from any single source' (2006, 33).² The *Natural History* is unlike the modern encyclopaedic genre as it is not merely a dry and objective recounting of facts. Instead, Pliny's own personal beliefs on the natural world are evident throughout the work, and he has been noted at various points to employ a powerful degree of enthusiasm for his project, combined also with an occasional tendency for moralising statements (Wallace-Hadrill 1990, 81). Two interrelated aspects of Pliny's thought are significant for how it impacts the *Natural History's* marine folklore: Pliny's conception of Nature as a divine entity itself, and the influence of ancient Stoicism. After an examination of these conceptions in the *Natural History*, I argue here that these underlying notions have influenced how Pliny selectively reports the folklore concerning the sea and its mythical inhabitants, highlighting that Pliny's depictions of these mythical sea creatures were not entirely representative of what was found in other ancient texts concerning these creatures and that the details he reports stand out as somewhat different from traditional Greco-Roman ideas of mythical sea creatures. Pliny's blend of a Stoic conception of Nature and moralising views, moreover, will be shown through an ecocritical perspective to essentially constitute a post-anthropocentric view, displacing not only the centrality of humans in relation to Nature, but also that of the anthropomorphic sea god and the marine figures traditionally associated with him.

Divine nature: Pliny's conception of the natural world

The principal focus of the *Natural History* is, of course, Nature as alluded to in the Latin title of the work, *Historia Naturalis*, a contrast with the traditional form of *Historia* in the mould established by earlier Greek historians, such as Herodotus and Thucydides, who had focused their inquiry on humans, and predominantly upon political events. Pliny further directly declares this focus in his preface, saying that 'the subject matter that is related here is a barren one; it is the Nature of things (*rerum natura*), or in other words, life' (*Natural History*, preface 13–15). He goes on to proclaim his work as also one whose scope had never before been attempted. Yet humans are certainly not excluded from the *Natural History*; Pliny devotes the entirety of his seventh volume to humans. The relationship between humanity and the rest of Nature was, moreover, a central theme underlying much of the *Natural History*. One section at the outset of his seventh book elucidates some aspects of this relationship:

The foremost rank will rightly be imparted to humankind (*homini*), for whose sake Great Nature seems to have produced all other things, with a cruel price for such gifts, so it is not sufficient to reckon whether Nature has been either a better parent to humankind (*homini*) or a more severe stepmother (*Natural History*, 7.1).

The reference to humanity as being assigned the first place seems initially to be merely an anthropocentric worldview formulated in a hierarchical manner that privileges humans above the rest of creation. Such thought was widespread throughout Greco-Roman antiquity and was perhaps best exemplified by Aristotle, who stated that plants exist for the sake of animals and that Nature has made all animals for the sake of humans (Renehan 1981, 253; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1256b). Humans were then commonly privileged to be at the height of this hierarchical chain in ancient thought, as noted in both temporal extremes of Greco-Roman antiquity in the Homeric poems and the thought of the Christians of Late Antiquity (Renehan 1981, 247, 254).

Despite the general pervasiveness of such views, Pliny's *Natural History* can be demonstrated to be a subtle departure from other ancient thought, which had traditionally subsumed nature under humanity. Mary Beagon, in her 1992 monograph on the *Natural History*, has noted the profound influence of Stoicism on Pliny's thought. Stoicism in the ancient world was notably critical of the traditional notions of anthropomorphic deities that interact with humans on an individual level, preferring instead a depersonalised and universal divinity (1992, 26–31, 94). This was distinct from the conception that will be familiar to modern readers from the tales of Greco-Roman mythology, an anthropomorphising of deities that Pliny emphatically derides as an instance of *imbecillitas humana* – 'human folly' (*Natural History*, 2.14–15). While he distances himself from such ideas, the influence of Stoic doctrines also affects Pliny's conception of Nature:

The world and this, whatever other name one wishes to call the sky, whose curvature covers all things, is suitable to be considered as a divinity (*numen*); it is eternal, boundless, and had no genesis, nor will it ever die ... And simultaneously the work of Nature and Nature itself (*idemque rerum naturae opus et rerum ipsa natura*) (*Natural History*, 2.1–2).

Nature, for Pliny, fulfils the Stoic role of a non-anthropomorphic divinity. In asserting such a belief, he elevates Nature beyond the status of a mere synonym for the natural environment (hence also my decision to capitalise the term when used in reference to

his conception). Nature is emphasised along explicitly paradoxical lines as simultaneously a construct of the divine force and the divine force itself, which further exceeds temporal and spatial dimensions, as well as the bounds of life and death. This is the basis for his beliefs about Nature and is, therefore, an implicit reasoning behind the critiques of human greed and hubris. Thus despite the privileging of humans in general, when considered in respect to Nature, Pliny does not regard humanity as the pinnacle of a hierarchical chain. After all, if Nature itself is perceived as a divine force, that impacts the way the humanity should interact with it, effectively creating a curious type of post-anthropocentric view divergent from typical anthropocentric outlooks. By 'post-anthropocentric' in this context, I mean only specifically in regard to Pliny's formulation of the relationship between humanity and divinity/Nature as contrasting with the view exemplified by Aristotle. Although Pliny regards humanity highly, as in the above passage (*Natural History*, 7.1), we can make a distinction in that Pliny does not regard Nature as essentially at the disposal of humanity. (Nor was it that humanity was granted a type of 'stewardship' over nature by the divine, as seen in some influential biblical passages, such as Genesis 2:15). Similarly, we may say that Pliny's notion of Nature is generally post-anthropocentric in its disavowal of human attributes to such a divine force.

Although Stoicism certainly cannot be said to be post-anthropocentric itself (the *Natural History* also being a departure in this regard), it nevertheless contributes another aspect to Pliny's framework of Nature. Stoic philosophy, while generally considered anthropocentric, has recently been recognised by Simon Shogry as containing strong prohibitions against environmental degradation (2020, 399–403). Such tendencies have, in particular, affected Pliny's conception of the relationship between humanity and Nature. Throughout the *Natural History*, Pliny is often critical of what he sees as humans' avarice in their uses of the natural world. One telling example of this moralising critique can be seen when, after having described a particularly destructive form of mining, he states:

The miners behold the ruin of Nature (*ruinam naturae*) as conquerors, yet there is still no gold, nor did they know of any when they were digging. It was hope for what they were desiring that was sufficient cause for going through such dangers and expenses (*Natural History*, 33.73).

Casting this as literally ruinous against Nature itself and adopting a contemptuous tone, bordering on outright mockery, for the futility of the miners' labours, Pliny firmly equates such enterprises with mere greed. Such avarice he had earlier in the text disparagingly compared to the ventures of humans to the sea depths to obtain expensive pearls and purple dyes (*Natural History*, 33.71). Thus, although Pliny has stated that elements of the natural world are created for the benefit of humanity, this does not, in his view, entitle humans to unlimited plunder and wanton exploitation of Nature. What seems at the outset of Book Seven to be just blatant anthropocentrism is, then, a much more nuanced view, which, though privileging humankind above all other creatures, does not wholly accept anthropic domination of the natural world. Moreover, as Wallace-Hadrill has recognised, these moralistic critiques against the human abuses of Nature are not merely personal asides occasionally inserted into Pliny's work, but rather 'an essential part of the argument, the underpinning and justification for his scientific labours' (1990, 89). Thus these critiques of human abuses of Nature and this formulation of

humanity's relationship to Nature are not merely personal asides inserted by Pliny, but rather an integral part of his scientific project and, consequently, a factor shaping the elements ultimately included in the *Natural History*.³

The enchanted sea of Pliny

When we turn to Pliny's view of the sea, we should first note that while he has stated Nature's occasional role to provide for humans, Nature does not do so in equal manner for every part of the environment. Beagon's monograph (1992) has examined the distinctions between the ways that Pliny views land and sea. For instance, land (*terra*), Pliny tells us, 'belongs to humans . . . it is never angry with humankind (*homini*)' (*Natural History*, 2.154). Such a possessive-sounding statement comes, of course, with the implicit caveat that humans are not wholly entitled to the destruction and abuse of the land. The sea, on the other hand, is never spoken of as being so possessed by humans and Pliny tends to speak of it in a manner that elevates it as a greater realm than the land. At the start of Book Thirty-two, which deals with medical remedies derived from the sea, he begins with a long statement on the wondrous elements of the sea:

We come to the height of Nature's works in the order of things (*ad summa naturae exemplorumque per rerum ordinem*), and it offers by its own accord immeasurable proof of its hidden power, that truly we ought not to seek anything beyond nor is it possible for anything equal or similar to be found. Nature has outdone itself, and indeed in a multitude of methods. For what is more impetuous than the sea, winds, whirlwinds, and tempests? (*Natural History*, 32.1).

While Beagon has generally noted Pliny's penchant for using adjectives such as *mirus* – 'wonderful' – to describe Nature and its works at various points,⁴ Pliny's stance on the marine realm goes beyond even this with his tone of amazement and his positioning of it as the highest of Nature's works, highlighting the special place of the marine environments in the *Natural History*. Pliny, after all, viewed the sea as a realm that is exceptionally generative and produces the most massive creatures:

Moreover, there are many creatures in these spaces even larger than those on land. The evident cause of this is the excessiveness of liquid (*umoris luxuria*) . . . But in the sea, lying so broad, being pliant and productive with nutriment, because it receives productive causes from above and from generative Nature, even monstrous things are discovered and entangled in it are the seeds and foundations, blending in this way and that way, now by the wind, now by the waves, thereby proving the popular opinion that what is born in any part of Nature exists also in the sea, alongside many things, which do not exist elsewhere (*Natural History*, 9.1).

This notion of the marine world as a place for unique and monstrous creatures relies on many of the earlier Greek ideas that categorise the sea as a cosmological element and water itself as inherently generative (Rudhardt 1971, 117–118; Houle 2010, 105–109, 155–164). It is precisely this belief in the generative quality of the marine world that makes it an enchanted realm for Pliny, but such a generative force occurs in a reflective sense, mirroring the creatures of the terrestrial world (including humans, as we shall see below),⁵ while also going beyond the terrestrial sphere with its capacity to bring forth other creatures.

This enchanted marine world, though Pliny acknowledges its occasionally violent aspects, is not directly inimical to humankind. This belief may also be derived from a Stoic tendency to exculpate Nature of any direct blame. Beagon notes an instructive example of this habit in the tale about poisonous honey, wherein Pliny suggests that this type of honey is simply Nature's way of making humans 'more cautious and less avaricious', rather than faulting Nature for producing such a toxic substance (*Natural History*, 21.77–78; Beagon 1992, 41). Such a shift in blame and responsibility is well suited to Pliny's post-anthropocentric framework, and the example of toxic honey serves as a particularly poignant counter to any anthropocentric assumptions that all elements of the natural environment were crafted specifically for the benefit of humans.⁶ As for the sea, Pliny also notes that while there are unpredictable gusts of wind, Nature has prescribed springtime for sailing in contrast to the more dangerous venture of sailing in winter (*Natural History*, 2.47). Pliny thus lays the onus on humankind to stay within Nature's allotted seasonal limits for sailing. Such practical advice stands out not only for its emphasis on human responsibility in seafaring, but also for the absence of any role accorded to prayers to Poseidon/Neptune or other marine powers, even though such invocations were commonplace in the ancient world and were occasionally reflected in ancient narratives, as well as literary depictions of the sea god's ability to either perturb or placate the sea at will.⁷ Pliny, moreover, was certainly aware of the figures traditionally associated with the sea god, as he recalls having personally seen a sculpture in Rome that depicted Neptune alongside the Nereids, Tritons, sea monsters and other marine figures. (*Natural History*, 36.26).⁸

The natural divine: Pliny's Nereids and Tritons

Pliny's omission of any role for Poseidon/Neptune, and emphasis on human practicality at sea has a subsequent effect upon the types of stories he reports about mythical sea creatures that would have traditionally been tied to the sea god in this period. Although this conception of the sea without one of its central deities arguably also has ramifications for other aspects of Pliny's marine realm and the creatures within it, for reasons of interest and space, I focus only on the most prominent mythical entities in this regard. The first example of this occurs with Pliny's reports concerning the Nereids:

And the Governor of Gaul wrote to the divine Augustus⁹ that many deceased Nereids appeared on the shore ... During Tiberius' reign, on an island off the coast of the province of Lyons, the alternating ocean (*oceanus*) left over 300 monsters (*beluas*) of a wonderous variety and size. No fewer were on the coast of Santes. Among those left were sea elephants, and sea rams, having features resembling horns only in their whiteness, and truly many Nereids (*Natural History*, 9.4).

Pliny's account of the Nereids further records an exceptional appearance, saying: 'And the usual form of the Nereids is not false, except that their body is rough with scales (*squamis*) even where they have human likeness (*humanam effigiem*)' (*Natural History*, 9.4). These reports are exceptional as they stand in sharp contrast to the common depictions of the Nereids as the daughters of Nereus, and one of them, Amphitrite, was frequently said to be the wife of Poseidon. In ancient art they were routinely depicted as beautiful women,

wholly anthropomorphic and lacking any scales; similarly, textual sources idealise them as paradigms of beauty.¹⁰ Yet in the *Natural History* there is no explicit mention of any divine association to the Nereids, nor of their archetypal beauty; consequently they appear to be just another scaly marine animal, whose mangled corpses occasionally washed up on Roman beaches.

Traces of Pliny's selection bias for non-divinised versions of mythical marine entities in the *Natural History* can also be seen with the merman-like figures of the Tritons. As Pliny records: 'A legation from Lisbon was sent on account of this to the Emperor Tiberius to report that a Triton was seen and heard playing on its shell-trumpet in a certain cave and its form was that by which it is known' (*Natural History*, 9.4). As with the Nereids, this can be contrasted with the general notions of Tritons in the ancient world; Hesiod had first depicted Triton as a singular deity and the son of Poseidon. Although this figure would become pluralised in later centuries, Tritons still frequently retained an association to Poseidon/Neptune as a type of aide to the sea god.¹¹ Pliny's report of a Triton, lacking any explicit mention of divine attributes, can be compared with another ancient text from the third century A.D. Aelian in his *History of Animals* reports one such encounter with the body of a dead Triton preserved in the Greek town of Tanagra. One of the town's inhabitants was said to have cut a piece of skin from its corpse and burned it in order to test the composition of the creature's skin, which led to unfortunate consequences later:

But at any rate the experiment incurred a grave cost. For not long after this he perished crossing over a small and narrow strait in a short, six-oared boat. The people of Tanagra say, as it is reported, that this happened to him since he profaned (*ēsebēse*) the Triton. They asserted that once his frigid corpse was extricated from the sea, the body expelled an ichor (*ichōra*) which had an odour resembling that of the hide of the Triton when he had burned it (Aelian, *History of Animals*, 13.21).

Aelian's Triton thus retains something of its sacral aura owing to its traditional association with Poseidon/Neptune. Here, it is a creature that was not to be defiled, and seemingly not just an ordinary sea animal as the Greek term for the 'ichor' here can denote any general liquid, but ominously can also refer to the blood-like fluid that flowed within the bodies of the gods. The Tritons of the *Natural History* though are perhaps just male equivalents of the Nereids. Pliny refers to Nereids and Tritons in his catalogue of sea creatures as well as 'sea people' (*homines marini*), though it is not clear how, if at all, he meant to distinguish these three (*Natural History*, 32.53). Nevertheless, the use of the word *homines* recalls his placement of (terrestrial) humans in relation to Nature. One of these marine people is also mentioned by Pliny in another report: 'I have illustrious authorities of equestrian rank stating that a human of the sea (*marinum hominem*) in absolute resemblance to a human in its entire body was seen by them in the Gulf of Cadiz (*in Gaditano oceano*)'.¹² He goes on to recall how this creature may sit on the side of ships and may cause them to sink below the water if it stays there for a long period of time (*Natural History*, 9.4). Thus the Nereids, Tritons and 'sea people' are certainly curious oddities among the creatures of the marine realm, yet, through the omission of any divinisation, these humanoid elements of Pliny's sea do not stand out from the rest of its inhabitants. In this manner, Pliny's post-anthropocentric outlook and Stoic idealisation of Nature has a horizontalizing effect, dispossessing the sea god's anthropic associates of their typically privileged rank as divine entities.

Fantastic sea beasts: the sea monsters of the *Natural History*

The final figures impacted by the decentring of Poseidon/Neptune are the more bestial creatures encompassed in the ancient ideas of sea monsters. Pliny's reports concerning them do not situate them in an overly aggressive context, at least not towards humans, nor is there any explicit connection made to the sea god. For instance, he claims the fleet of Alexander the Great had encountered giant monsters (*beluae*), but these creatures are not said to have attacked the fleet and it is only their immense size that proved to be an inconvenient obstacle for the ships (*Natural History*, 9.2). Other ancient texts, though, did record details about some sea monsters as overtly hostile entities, focusing predominately on the creature typically known to modern scholars by the ancient Greek term *kētōs* (pl. *kētē*),¹³ a type of monster with alternately piscine and serpentine attributes. Aelian records one such tale of a hostile sea monster involved in divine retribution:

They say the pilot-fish is sacred not only to Poseidon, but also dear to the gods of Samothrace. At any rate, a certain fisherman in another time suffered a punishment because of this fish. The name of the fisherman, as the story goes, was Epopeus; he was from the island of Icarus and had a son. When he was once lacking any fish, he drew up a net of only captured pilot-fish, of which Epopeus made a meal, together with his son. But not long afterwards, exacting justice came after him. For a sea monster (*kētōs*) came upon his boat and swallowed Epopeus before the eyes of his son (Aelian, *History of Animals*, 15.23).

We can note here the explicit link of pilot-fish to Poseidon, while the sea monster itself functions, as it does in the myths of Hesione and Andromeda, as the means for Poseidon's vengeance. By contrast, the only instance of a sea monster in connection with the sea god in the *Natural History* occurs when Pliny briefly mentions the Andromeda myth, telling how the gigantic bones of that monster were supposedly discovered and conveyed to Rome (*Natural History*, 9.4). Pliny's statements concerning sea monsters are habitually fixated on their immense size, such as when he provides the exact length of the supposed bones of the creature from the Andromeda myth, noting they were much larger than those of elephants (*Natural History*, 9.4).¹⁴ Indeed, Pliny seems exceptionally preoccupied with the immense size of sea monsters, making mention also of some that are so large that they are immobile (*Natural History*, 9.2). These are seemingly more docile creatures than sea monsters included in other texts of the Roman period, which are frequently said to specifically attack humans or the ships themselves.¹⁵ These tales may serve primarily to reinforce his opening statement concerning the sea as a space for the largest creatures, but Pliny does not fill the sea with many monsters that are overtly hostile to humans, perhaps in order to avoid portraying Nature as a force that breeds entities hostile to humankind. Thus Pliny's sea monsters come off as merely gigantic wonders of Nature's generative capabilities, rather than the ferocious beasts tied to the sea god.

Conclusion

I began with Anderson's statement concerning the *Natural History* as the largest single source of ancient folklore. Yet, as I have hoped to show here, much of this was skewed in a particular direction relative to the full scope of the ancient imagination. Moreover, it is through an ecocritical reading, whereby we consider Pliny's conception of Nature, that we can understand the cause of this. For Pliny, the traditional attributes of divinity have been

rearranged with the divine elements being attributed entirely to Nature itself and everything else of the sea being a creation of that divine Nature. Within his post-anthropocentric framework, it could hardly be possible to privilege the anthropic marine denizens above all else. Pliny's project with the *Natural History* was not to repeat the traditional notions and stories of the Greco-Roman pantheon, but rather to report what he deemed to be credible facts about Nature and its creations. Such an underlying focus makes it hardly surprising that an ecocritical reading of this text would prove fruitful; what is perhaps more revealing is how such a reading can elucidate the intertwined conceptions of nature and folklore. Although Nereids, Tritons, and sea monsters certainly do not exist in what we would call 'objective reality', Pliny's conceptions of Nature and the exceptionally generative powers, both reflective of terrestrial creatures and monster-producing, of the marine realm fostered the possibility that certain versions of these could be said to be more 'realistic' in relation to his version of reality. We can, in a sense, say that these were more 'naturalised' variations of the folkloric mythical marine entities. Yet, it should be understood with the caveat that this is only 'naturalised' relative to Pliny's understanding of Nature, a divine force that permitted the existence of sea people and gargantuan marine monsters.

Notes

1. The citations for ancient texts here are those conventionally used to divide up and reference texts in the field of Classics. Prose works are variously divided depending on each text. For instance, *Natural History*, 7.1, refers to book 7, chapter 1 of Pliny's *Natural History*; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1256b, refers to section 1256, subsection b, of Aristotle's *Politics*. For verse works, this is more straightforward: Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, 2.535, refers to book 2, line 535 of that work. Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own, derived from the Latin or Greek texts in the corresponding Loeb editions found on the Digital Loeb Classical Library.
2. Folklore, a term already notoriously difficult to define, is made even more complicated when considered in historical contexts where the discipline's typical methods of fieldwork and collection of oral data (see, for instance, Bronner 2017, 54–72) are impossible. Nevertheless, I follow Anderson's generalising approach (on which, see also 2006, 2–6) in considering folklore as a broad category of cultural elements, narrative or otherwise (hence, 'folkloric data'), passed on outside of institutional structures. On the issue of defining folklore (and the related 'folktale') in Greco-Roman antiquity, see also Hansen (1988) and Hansen (2002, 1–19). For another example of folklore as applied to Pliny (albeit also utilising modern examples), see Ingemark (2008).
3. By 'scientific project' we should note that this is by no means anything resembling modern empirical science that is grounded in observation and experimentation. Instead, Pliny's method seems to have been a process of selective inclusion of information based on what he deemed credible, either through the contents of a document conforming to his conception of Nature, or reports deemed as authoritative based on their source or recipient (on the latter, see *Natural History*, 9.4: reports of Nereids coming from the governor of Gaul and the report about Tritons sent to the emperor Tiberius). On Pliny's science and factors influencing his own reporting, see also Beagon (1992, 11, n.30); Kitchell (2015).
4. Beagon (2007, 19) also notes in particular Pliny's declaration: 'For when I behold Nature, it always persuades me to consider nothing about it to be unbelievable' (*Natural History*, 11.6), a statement he follows with the example of his amazement at marine creatures that are able to breathe under water.

5. The reflective qualities of the marine world can also be seen in the ancient nomenclature for sea creatures in both ancient Greek and Latin, which were commonly just the words for their perceived terrestrial equivalents. Two examples of this can be seen in *Natural History*, 9.2, where sea creatures washed up on shore are referred to as elephants (*elephantos*) and rams (*arietes*). Pliny's catalogue of sea creatures (*Natural History*, 32.54) also contains many examples of such nomenclature. For the proliferation of marine counterparts of terrestrial animals in ancient art from the Hellenistic period onward, see also Shepard ([1940] 2011, 78). On the later influences of notions concerning the sea's mirroring of land creatures, see Honegger (2017, 521, n. 2).
6. On the general ancient folklore of toxic honey, see also Mayor (1995).
7. On literary scenes of such prayers before sailing, see, for instance, Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, 2.32. The most well-known ancient literary scenes of Poseidon/Neptune stirring up and calming the sea occur in Homer's *Odyssey* (5.282–296) and Vergil's *Aeneid* (1.124–156), respectively. Miniature fish and ship models have also been found in archaeological evidence, likely intended as votive offerings in connection with prayers of gratitude to the sea god for lucky fishing expeditions or safe voyages. See Murray (2014, 91, n.33).
8. On the figures of this sculptural group in other ancient art, see also Lattimore (1976, 50–62).
9. The Latin honorific phrase *divo Augusto* here signifies only the posthumous deification of the emperor and is not a reflection of Pliny's own views towards Augustus.
10. Barringer (1995, 4, n.14). See also, for instance, Hesiod, *Theogony*, 240; Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, 1.1.2, 3.2.15. The Nereids' characteristic beauty also plays a central role in the Andromeda myth, where it is the claim of Cassiopeia to be more beautiful than the Nereids that incurs Poseidon's wrath and subsequently the dispatching of a sea monster to terrorise the city; see, for instance, Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 2.43; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 64. On other instances where Nereids appear in their more traditional contexts, see also Beaulieu (2015, 74–77; 135–137).
11. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 930–933. On the being associated with Poseidon/Neptune see, for instance, Statius, *Achilleid*, 1.55, where Tritons are said to be the 'arms-bearers' (*armigeri*) of the sea god.
12. As with the above reference to Nereids and other marine creatures being washed up on shore, Pliny relates this to the waters of *oceanus* and both reports seem to refer to places along the Western coast of the Iberian Peninsula.
13. The seminal works of scholarship on the *kētē* are Boardman (1987) and Ogden (2013, 116–129). Pliny's word for sea monster, *belua*, is significant for frequently being the Latin equivalent of *kētōs* when used in a marine context. See, for instance, Manilius, *Astronomica*, 5.544; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, 2.535.
14. The comparison to elephants is not insignificant for Pliny's point of the sea producing the largest creatures as he had earlier in the *Natural History* noted that elephants are the largest land animal (8.1).
15. See, for instance, Dionysius Periegetes, *Description of the World*, 596–605; Oppian, *Halieutica*, 5.56–61; Aelian, *History of Animals*, 14.23.

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