



Green, M. (2013) 'Eating and Nature: Tools of Political and Social Critique in Ancient Rome'

*Rosetta* **13**: 42-52.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue\\_13/green\\_eating.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue_13/green_eating.pdf)

---

## Eating and Nature: Tools of Political and Social Critique in Ancient Rome

Mira Green

University of Washington

Writing in the first century CE, Seneca the Younger expresses discomfort about his body's nutritional needs and claims that: 'Man's primary art is virtue itself. Joined to this is useless and fleeting flesh, suitable only for the reception of food' (*Ep.* 92.10).<sup>1</sup> He refers to his body as *caro* (flesh), which term he relies on in another letter to underscore the human body's opposition to the spirit.<sup>2</sup> Not only is his body *caro* but also *inutilis* (useless) and *fluida* (soft/fleeting). Because it taints man's primary purpose to seek virtue, he deplores the body's alimentary process and makes the body nothing more than a receptacle of food. Seneca's moralising use of the body's nutritional demands is echoed in other Roman authors' works and his views on ingestion play an important role in the development of a correlation between the body's alimentary functions and social standing.<sup>3</sup> Although the use of ingestion as commentary on man's virtue and behaviour is a subtle development from the late Republican period to the end of the second century CE, it shines a light on how the elite in Rome experienced and coped with the changes that took place during this period.

This paper examines one thread of this development that specifically ties ingestion and the body to changes that occurred to the Roman state and its society. The social and political restructuring of the late Republic and early Principate challenged traditional modes of behaviours and hierarchies.<sup>4</sup> It is particularly striking that elite authors - who were not doctors and were not writing medical texts - began to fill their writings with

---

<sup>1</sup> *Prima ars hominis est ipsa virtus; huic committitur inutilis caro et fluida, receptandis tantum cibis habilis.*

<sup>2</sup> See Seneca *Ep.* 65.22.

<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I will focus Cicero, Seneca the Younger, and Pliny the Elder's specific use of ingestion, but one can also find references to the digestive process in conjunction with improper social behaviors found in Celsus, Juvenal, and Martial. For some brief examples see, Celsus 1.2:1-2, 1.3:17-18, 21; Juv. 11.35-41; Martial 1.20, 11.86.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Syme 1939; Roller 2001; Gunderson 2003; Mellor 2003; Frederick 2003.

detailed accounts of the human body's physiology during this period.<sup>5</sup> Norbet Elias' masterful work on French and German manners provides insight into this development in Latin authors' texts. He argues that when people of talent and renown concern themselves with bodily behaviours, it is an indicator of social restructuring.<sup>6</sup> I argue that Roman authors' interest in the alimentary process is a manifestation of the social and political changes of the late Republic and early Principate. Indeed, Cicero, Seneca the Younger, and Pliny the Elder all employ an understanding of *natura* (nature) to frame their discussions about the human body.<sup>7</sup> I contend that these authors envisioned that the body's ingestion of food was intimately tied to a cosmological/natural order and that the level of concordance between the alimentary process and nature illuminates each author's response to the political canvas of his day.

In the tumultuous last days of the late Republic, Cicero relays the inspired relationship between physical ingestion and nature to reassert traditional Roman hierarchies in his *De Natura Deorum*. For Cicero, nature is frequently, but not always, benevolent to mankind and he finds nature's divine forethought in the very structure of the human body. Indeed, he prefaces his explanation of digestion with an explicit link to the stoic concept of providence: 'And it will be more easily understood that there was the immortal gods' divine foresight for man, if the whole structure of man and all the conformation and perfection of human nature is considered' (*Nat.D.* 2.133).<sup>8</sup> In essence, nature is governed well by the gods and human physiology is evidence of this.

---

<sup>5</sup> Grant 2000: 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Elias 2000 [1939]: 62, 69-72. Similarly, relying on Norbet Elias's work, Wallace-Hadrill argues that if Roman sumptuary laws were about the competitive struggle within the nobility they would have focused on the house rather than food. See Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 336.

<sup>7</sup> Inwood 2005: 224. Although I rely on the term of nature and natural law, Inwood points out that the term natural law has been controversial for ancient studies (particularly ancient philosophy) because its later history has been entangled with Christian theology and seventeenth century notions of natural law. See also Heinonen 2000: 18-20. Heinonen notes that stoics primarily described nature in two ways: 1) it holds the world together and causes things on earth to grow and 2) it is endowed with an extraordinary rationality. Heinonen also argues that stoic thought envisioned an individual human being as an essential part of nature and the cosmic order, thereby making humans' part in the world precise and integral. In effect, cosmic events and human actions are not separate.

<sup>8</sup> *faciliusque intellegetur a dis immortalibus hominibus esse provisum, si erit tota hominis fabricatio perspecta omnisque humanae naturae figura atque perfectio.*

This opening underlines his overtly positive view of the body's form and its somatic functions, and it sets up his description of physical ingestion. He declares that there are three things essential to maintain all animal life: food, drink, and breath, for which the mouth is most aptly formed (*Nat.D.* 2.134). He then explains that the mouth leads to the tongue, to the gullet, to the stomach, to the intestines, and finally to the liver. These muscles and organs are connected to and assisted by other body parts not immediately related to ingestion or digestion: that is, the vena vacca is connected to the heart and the veins, and the rough windpipe is connected to the lungs (*Nat.D.* 2.135-138). Thus, Cicero describes the organs involved in the ingestion and digestion of food as connected to one another. In fact, it is difficult to see whether Cicero conceives of digestive organs as distinct things even though he attempts to describe them each in turn and according to their function. Rather, he highlights his understanding of the human body as an entirety with each part connected to or reliant on others. The human body consumes and digests food as an integrated whole.

The body's interconnected functions, however, do not mean that Cicero esteems each part equally. Instead, Cicero declares that *natura* made humans upright so that they might be able to look towards the sky and gain knowledge of the gods (*Nat.D.* 140). He then lists different body parts and functions that accomplish this purpose in a descending order. Senses that help interpret the outside world are found in the head. Because eyes are *speculatores* (watchmen), they have the highest position. In order to hear sound that travels upward, ears are also high on the body. The nose is on the head because it must be able to discern food and drink that is brought near the mouth, which holds taste (*Nat.D.* 2.140-141). The hierarchy of position and preference for the head over all other body parts comes to the foreground when Cicero compares the location of the head and bowels in the body's form to the structures of a house: 'And just as in a house architects remove from the eyes and nose of the masters (*dominorum*) that which, as it flowed forth, would inevitably be somewhat offensive, so *natura* has banished similar things (*res similibus*) from the senses' (*Nat.D.* 2.141).<sup>9</sup> For

---

<sup>9</sup> *atque ut in aedificiis architecti avertunt ab oculis naribusque dominorum ea, quae profluentia necessario tætri essent aliquid habitura, sic natura res similibus procul amandavit a sensibus.*

Cicero, the logic of architects' domestic designs seems catered to the needs and desires of the *dominus*—the male owner of the house and word normally reserved for a slave owner. Metaphorically, this articulates an inherent logic in the structure of the human form: the head is associated with the powerful role of the *dominus* of the house while the location of the plumbing in the house is compared to *res similis*—politely implying excretory functions—that *natura* has removed from the senses. For Cicero, the body's alimental process demonstrates nature's divine foresight, which associates the body's economy with the structure of the Roman house and the social hierarchy found within its walls.

It is not by chance that Cicero refers to the hierarchies found in the domestic realm. In another work, he mentions that the three places where a man made an impression on others were the forum, the theatre and the house (*QFr.* 2.14b.2). Indeed, the Roman house, as Bettina Bergmann has observed, was 'perceived as an extension of the self, signaling piety to divine protectors and social and genealogical status to the world outside.'<sup>10</sup> The house was an essential component in a Roman man's display of his social standing, particularly during the Republic when the patron/client relationship played a meaningful role in an elite man's political life.<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that Cicero relies on the cultural significance and established hierarchies that the Roman home invokes while penning *De Natura Deorum* three years into Julius Caesar's dictatorship and the year before his assassination. Suetonius records several socially destabilising acts, such as creating new patricians, offering citizenship to medical practitioners and tutors, setting laws against luxury, and even going so far as sending *lictors* and guards into dining rooms to confiscate illegal dishes, that Caesar tried to implement with his new authority (*Jul.* 41-43). In the face of these changes that Caesar sought to carry out, Cicero maps on the body a natural and social order that reasserts traditional values and domestic hierarchies of the Republic.

---

<sup>10</sup> Bergmann 1994: 225.

<sup>11</sup> Platt 2011: 243; Wallace-Hadrill 1994: 4.

Under the turbulent reign of Nero, Seneca the Younger also describes in detail the body and its somatic functions. Like Cicero, he occasionally finds evidence for nature's order in the internal workings of the human body. Unlike Cicero who works from the natural world to the human body, Seneca starts with the logic of the human body and places that on the world. Additionally, he focuses on distinct elements of the human body, representing them as unconnected to other parts. For instance, veins are not connected to any other organ; they are simply represented as passageways through which liquid flows (*NQ.* 3.15.1).<sup>12</sup> Semen is abstractly related to a man's hair and beard, but he does not attempt to trace this connection as Cicero does (*NQ.* 3.29.3-4). He prefers to treat the body as fragments of an undefined whole rather than integral parts belonging to a highly ordered and structured unit.

In a rare instance when he focuses on many parts of the body in a single discussion, Seneca treats the body as a list of grievances and disjointed parts. He starts with pain found in nerves, joints, and narrow passages and then moves to gout that affects the feet and hands. The vertebrae and nerves suffer from similar intervals of physical agony. Hurt felt in teeth, eyes, and ears is similar because of the narrowness of these areas. Seneca distinguishes the head; however, he does so not for its privileged position but rather for its danger to the *animus*. Acute pain here will turn to *delirium* and *stupor* (*Ep.* 78.7-10). Far from a connected, hierarchical, and ordered whole, Seneca's description of the body is a mish-mash of elements. Nature's foresight does not rule the body and its functions; instead, it is tied together by pain and suffering. In fact, the most consistent aspect in all of Seneca's discussions of the body is his vision of the body as a loosely connected collection of parts, which is susceptible to weakness and vice.<sup>13</sup> The body is a burden that man must bear, not love (*Ep.* 92.33).

---

<sup>12</sup> See also Seneca *NQ.* 6.14 and *N.Q.* 5.4.2 for other examples of Seneca's parallels between human body and earth.

<sup>13</sup> Although Seneca generally has a negative view of the body, and of ingestion in particular, there are occasional passages that present a more positive view or at least one that is ambiguous. For examples of Seneca's more ambivalent discussions of the body see *Ep.* 71.33, 72.6, and 101.7-10. For a positive view of digestion, see *Ep.* 84.5. It is worth noting, however, that in this letter Seneca subordinates the body to the *animus* and he turns to more neutral language to name the body parts involved in the alimentary canal, which is distinct from the language he uses in other letters. For instance, he compares the process of sifting through readings to a bee's production of honey, whose sweetness is different from whence it

When he discusses the eating process specifically, Seneca does not employ his own words but rather mentions Posidonius as his source only to mock his description.<sup>14</sup> Relaying Posidonius' analogy of bread-making to ingestion, Seneca records that, when grain enters the mouth, it is crushed by the teeth and tongue working together. This masticated mass then passes down the slippery throat to be digested by the stomach's heat (*Ep.* 90. 22).<sup>15</sup> From this account, it seems that Seneca is aware of the same types of sources that influenced Cicero's views of the body and that he is not critical about Posidonius' description of the alimentary process. Rather, Seneca scorns Posidonius because he uses human physiology to elevate the station of bakers. In fact, he fears that Posidonius will not stop at simply elevating bakers to *sapientes* (wise men); he will likely try to do the same with cobblers (*Ep.* 90.23). Seneca's derision of another's socio-hierarchical use of the body presents the pecking order that informs his thought. Those that pursue wisdom are placed at the top of his hierarchy and are distinguished from craftsmen. Bakers and cobblers are not *sapientes* because their professions are grounded in the material world. Thus, he denigrates Posidonius' claims because the latter finds wisdom and value through the imitation of the physical world rather than the *animus* and immaterial.<sup>16</sup>

---

came but nevertheless does not betray its origins. Significantly, Seneca does not employ either *gula* (gullet/gluttony) or *venter* (belly/wanton void) when discussing the eating process here, but rather calls the body part involved *stomachus* (gullet/alimentary canal). Contrastingly, in another letter in which he focuses on one's mistaken pursuit to fulfill bodily needs, Seneca relies on charged terms like *gula* and *venter* to name digestive organs in order to underscore their corrupting properties (*Ep.* 110.12). In fact, he commonly reserves *venter* and *gula* to point out the dangers of favouring the body and its needs above the *animus* (for other examples of his moralising use of *venter*, see *Ep.* 80.4, 114.26, and 123. 1-3). Moreover, he bristles at the results of their functions, calling it *foeditas* (foulness). Yet, in epistle 84, Seneca describes the alimentary process as beneficial because he is arguing for the unity of one's thoughts through the successful integration of one's studies. Notably, he selects only to mention digestion - not excretion - and food's conversion is compared to honey whereas later it becomes *foeditas*. Thus, only when ingestion suits his admonitions to pursue the life of the mind over the body does Seneca esteem the body's process of changing food from its original form as natural and beneficial.

<sup>14</sup> For discussions on Posidonius' influence on Seneca thoughts, see Holler 1934; Fillion-Lahille 1984; and Inwood 2005.

<sup>15</sup> *deinde non est contentus his artibus, sed in pistrinum sapientem summittit. Narrat enim quemadmodum rerum naturam imitatus panem coeperit facere. "receptas," inquit, "in os fruges concurrans inter se duritia dentium frangit, et quicquid excidit, ad eosdem dentes lingua refertur; tunc vero miscetur, ut facilius per fauces lubricas transeat. cum pervenit in ventrem, aequali eius fervore concoquitur, tunc demum corpori accedit.*

<sup>16</sup> Heinonen 2000; 72.

Seneca's view of the body is a telling critique of the time in which he lived. Tacitus records that Nero marked elite bodies in ways that were offensive and humiliating (*Ann.*15.34-37). By making elite men and women put on the clothing and perform the actions of the disenfranchised or ridiculed, Nero undermined the elite's position and prestige in Rome in the most intimate way he could: turning their daily, physical appearance and experiences into a reminder of their subordination to his authority. It is no wonder that Seneca more frequently than not expresses scorn for the body and refers to it as either *rex* (king) or *tyrannus* (tyrant) (*Ep.* 114.23-37). As a response to Nero's rule, Seneca fragments and disparages the body.

Pliny the Elder, writing during the relatively stable and peaceful period of Vespasian's reign, produces a natural history that is more optimistic than Seneca the Younger's letters. Moreover, his encyclopedic opus presupposes a universal availability of countries' resources to the centre of empire and the continual movement of things from the periphery to Rome.<sup>17</sup> As Mary Beagon notes, Pliny was in sympathy with the general tone of imperial politics under the Flavians and his work is very much a product of the age.<sup>18</sup> Even though Pliny's work demonstrates a concordance with the Flavians, he, like Cicero and Seneca, details the physiology of ingestion and uses this somatic function to make claims about man's relationship with *natura*. Thus, his use of the body's alimentary process suggests a society in transition, even as he displays personal sympathies for Flavian policies.

When he explores ingestion specifically, interconnection and movement characterise his description. Following his typical pattern of comparing the human body part to that of an animal - in this case the swine - he details the body's alimentary process by describing tonsils, tongue, uvula, and the smaller tongue, which sits between two passages. This smaller tongue serves as a cover for the interior passage, which leads to the lungs and heart, in order to keep food and drink out. The exterior passage receives food and drink, and leads to the gullet and tongue (*HN* 11.66). Discussing the alimentary process, Pliny

---

<sup>17</sup> Murphy 2004; 50.

<sup>18</sup> Beagon 1992: 6.

attempts to represent each organ accurately as well as their individual roles in ingestion. Although he does not discuss how the stomach is attached to the intestines or bowels, it is possible to see that, much like Cicero, Pliny reveals an understanding of the body's alimentary organs as connected not simply to one another but also to other body parts.

Like Cicero, Pliny observes a physical hierarchy in his own work, and relies on comparisons to insects, animals, the city, and government to develop his view of the body. Yet, where Cicero uses domestic spaces and hierarchies to suggest the head's pre-eminent position in the body, Pliny turns to the urban landscape and political offices. Rather than the *dominus*, Pliny's brain is the sense's *arx* and the mind's *regimen*: 'The senses hold this organ as the citadel (*arx*); to this organ all of the veins from the heart reach, here they all end, it is the governor (*regimen*) of the mind' (*HN* 11.49).<sup>19</sup> Pliny's use of the image of the *arx* with all the veins from the heart leading to and ending there suggests a visual imagery of roads leading to the citadel, and of the periphery being connected to the centre. That is, the heart and the brain are connected, but the role of the heart is to sustain and serve the brain. His description of veins feeding into the brain maps on the body not only his physical hierarchy, but also assumptions about the constant movement from periphery to centre that were characteristic of the Flavian Empire. Moreover, Pliny's reliance on the inherent order and power of the urban landscape and government offices highlights a confidence in the political institutions of his day that are singularly lacking in Cicero's and Seneca's descriptions. In effect, Pliny does not use the body's economy and form to resist but rather to proclaim support for the political structures of his day.

Notwithstanding the clear superiority of the head, Pliny's discussion becomes entangled when he turns inward. This entanglement, however, is telling because it denotes Pliny's understanding of the body's interdependence and interconnection. For instance, when discussing different ailments that afflict the eyes, Pliny proposes his personal theory that the eyes and *stomachus* (gullet) are connected. 'The most learned authors recount that

---

<sup>19</sup> *hanc habent sensus arcem, huc venarum omnis a corde vis tendit, hic desinit, hoc column altissimum, hic mentis est regimen.*

veins reach from [the eye] to the brain, but I am inclined to believe that it is to the *stomachus*; for certainly no one's eye is lost without feeling sickness here' (*HN* 11.55).<sup>20</sup> In effect, he envisions a complicated internal net of veins uniting seemingly unrelated body parts. It is as though he physically interiorises the assumptions he has about movement and availability of goods in the empire. For Pliny, both the external world of the Roman Empire and internal structure of the human body are intricately connected to the various heads of body or empire.

In sum, this link between the body, nature, and the state can be traced through the late Republic and early Principate, with different authors using it either to resist or confirm the authority of contemporary political leaders. The inherent logic and order of ingestion explained for Cicero and Pliny the divine foresight of nature, man's pre-eminent position in the world, and inspired comparisons to domestic architecture and urban landscapes. However, Cicero's use of the body's ingestive functions reasserted traditional Republican hierarchies during the social upheaval Caesar invoked whereas Pliny's views about the body reflect confidence in the Flavians' governance. Although employing methods similar to Cicero and Pliny when speaking about the body and ingestion, Seneca's approach to the body's alimentary process highlights his profound discontent with the political and social changes that occurred during his time.

---

<sup>20</sup> *venas ab iis pertinere ad cerebrum peritissimi auctores tradunt; ego et ad stomachum crediderim: certe nulli sine redundatione eius eruitur oculus.*

## Bibliography

Beagon, M. 1992. *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bergmann, B. 1994 "The Roman House as Memory Theater: The House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii," in *The Art Bulletin* 76 (2), 225-256.

Boyle, A.J. and Dominik W.J. (eds.) 2003. *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

Elias, N. 2000 [1939]. *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Fillion-Lahille, J. 1984. *Le de ira de Sénèque et la philosophie stoïcienne des passions*. Paris: Klincksieck.

Fisher, N. and van Wees, H. 2011. *Competition in the Ancient World*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Fredrick, D. 2003. 'Architecture and Surveillance in Flavian Rome', in Boyle and Dominik (eds.), 199-228.

Grant, M. 2000. *Galen: On Food and Diet*. London: Routledge.

Gunderson, E. 2003. 'The Flavian Amphitheatre: All the World as Stage', in Boyle and Dominik (eds). 637-658.

Heinonen, S. 2000. *Prometheus Revisited: Human Interaction with Nature through Technology in Seneca*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica.

Holler, E. 1934. *Seneca und die Seelenteilungslehre und Affektpsychologie der Mittelstoa*. Kallmünz: M. Lassleben.

Inwood, B. 2005. *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mellor, R. 2003. 'The New Aristocracy of Power', in Boyle and Dominik (eds.), 69-102.

Murphy, T. 2004. *Pliny the Elder's Natural History: The Empire in the Encyclopedia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Platt, H. 2011. 'Keeping up with the Joneses: competitive display within the Roman villa landscape', in Fisher and van Wees (eds.), 239-278.

Roller, M. 2001. *Constructing Aristocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

*Rosetta* 13. [http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue\\_13/green\\_eating.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue_13/green_eating.pdf)

Syme, R. 1939. *The Roman Revolution*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Wallace-Hadrill, A. 2008. *Rome's Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wallace-Hadrill, A. 1994. *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.