The Natural History remained the great dictionary of knowledge throughout the Middle Ages. It was frequently copied over the centuries, either in part or entire, and was among the first books to be printed in Italy in 1469. To the great French naturalist, George Cuvier, it was a previous moment of the knowledge of ancient times. George Sarton, historian of science, considered it to have been not only the source of scientific information during the Middle Ages, but also an intellectual stimulant to the scholars of the Renaissance. By reading the Natural History we are absorbing not only facts about life in Roman times, but also a long tradition of European culture.

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http://volcanoes.usgs.gov/images/pglossary/Plinia
Eruption.php


Folk Medicine in the Roman Empire as recorded by Pliny the Elder and reported by C. Wilbur Rucker. The Mayo Alumnus, January 1974.


Information on some of the captions for this exhibit were from labels used in an exhibit at the 1983 meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine.
INTRODUCTION
Mayo Clinic History of Medicine Library is fortunate to own various editions of an impressive collection of an early encyclopedia, which appeared about AD 77, written by Gaius Plinius Secundus, better known as Pliny the Elder. Known by the Latin title Historia Naturalis (Natural History) this prized collection was donated by Dr. C. Wilbur Rucker, Mayo neuro-ophthalmologist.

References to Pliny’s observations on the eyes of animals and C. A. Wood’s translation of the statement: “The eyes of animals that see at night in the dark, cats for instance, are shining and radiant, so much so that it is impossible to look upon them; those of the she-goat, too, and the wolf are resplendent, and emit a light-like fire” led Dr. Rucker to investigate the Natural History and begin acquiring volumes. When he presented his collection to the History of Medicine Library in the early 1970s it contained 48 editions in six languages, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, English and German.

Pliny was commander of the fleet in the Bay of Naples when he learned of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in August, AD 79 (which was responsible for the burying of Pompeii and Herculaneum.) He went ashore to ascertain the cause and reassure the terrified citizens but was overcome by the fumes resulting from the volcanic activity, and died there. Owing to the circumstances of his death, volcanic eruptions that produce enormous dark columns of tephra and gas high in the stratosphere are referred to as “Plinian” eruptions.

Pliny was born in AD 23 in what is now Como, northern Italy. He was an author, naturalist, and natural philosopher, as well as naval and army commander of the early Roman Empire. The Historia Naturalis is an encyclopedic work in 37 books and was the only work by Pliny to have survived and the last he published, lacking a final revision at the time of his death. Dedicated to the emperor Titus, son of Pliny’s close friend, the emperor Vespasian, in the first year of Titus's reign, it is one of the largest single works to have survived from the Roman Empire and purports to cover all ancient knowledge.

Pliny appeared not to hold physicians in high esteem. He wrote: “They learne their skill by endaungering our lives: and to make prooffe and experiments of their medicines, they care not to kill us.” He claimed that the citizens of Rome “… continued for the space of six hundred years and above after the foundation of their citie, and knew not what a Physician meant…” He thought this more desirable, than “… these enormities and corruptions which have crept into our life, by nothing more than by the means of physicke …”

Having no faith in physicians Pliny devoted nearly half of his Natural History to describing ways in which animals, minerals, and plants can be used to benefit man. Baldness was apparently as bothersome in the first century as it is today. The remedy Pliny recommended was: “where the hair has been lost it is made to grow again by using ashes of burnt sheep’s dung, with oil of Cyprus and honey; or else the hoof of a mule … burnt to ashes and mixed with oil of myrtle…”

Remedies for rheumatism, headache and consumption using the blood, shavings of ivory and even the trunk of an elephant, as seen in this image, were also recommended.