



[Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* XXXVI.101-102](#)

Rome as a triumphal Eighth Wonder of the World.

Name of the author: Pliny the Elder

Date: 77 CE

Date: 1st CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Encyclopedia

Title of work: *Natural History*

Reference: XXXVI.101-102

Commentary:

Naturalis Historia (*Natural History*) is an encyclopaedia composed of thirty-seven books reviewing all contemporary knowledge related to life, including animals, vegetables, minerals, lands, and humans and their productions. It was dedicated by Pliny the Elder to Vespasian's "co-regent" and designated successor, Titus. Political and ideological themes or concerns outline this encyclopaedic work. As Edward Bispham recalls: "Pliny's description of the world is inextricably linked with the progress of the Roman conquest, and his inventory of the lands and even the seas of the world is as much a monument to imperial power as an exercise in geographical synthesis." Making lists or inventories of lands was thus a "corollary of conquest" and took part in "a strategy of control" (Bispham, "Pliny the Elder's Italy," p. 43).

The text presented here is a short excerpt from book XXXVI, which is the last of three books of the *Natural History* which present a summary of the history of ancient art. Pliny's discussions of art are influenced by various trends: some of them are the result of a desire to classify materials and artistic techniques, whereas others are deeply influenced by Pliny's rejection of the art of his time, which, for him, was symptomatic of the degeneration of the mores, an opinion which contradicts other areas of his writings in which he praises Rome for gathering the most spectacular and useful architectural creations in the world (see the introduction made by Agnès Rouveret in *Plinie l'Ancien, Histoire Naturelle. Livre XXXVI* [edition by J. André; translation by R. Bloch; commentary by A. Rouveret; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981], p. 8-14). After having dealt with various types of stones and their uses (§ 1-63), and describing the various Wonders of the World (§ 64-100), Pliny comes back to Rome and enumerates its most marvellous monuments to prove that Rome is actually the eighth and most beautiful Wonder of the World (§ 101-124). The text presented here is the beginning of this last discussion.

In § 101, which comes just after the description of the various Wonders of the World, Pliny mentions the *miracula* of Rome to assert that they were far superior to all others. While through paragraphs 64 to 100 he presents the wonders of the rest of the world in a quite scattered and confused way (actually, he mixes the Wonders of the World with other remarkable monuments or phenomena), in § 101 he starts with an introductory statement in which he says that he is going to deal with "the wonders of our own City" (*ad urbis nostrae miracula*), an expression strengthening the impression that Rome itself is the equivalent of a second world, and that it is far superior because it forms a coherent entity (Naas, *Le Projet Encyclopédique*, p. 335-339). Such an impression is confirmed by the next sentence: "if all [i.e. Rome's wonders] are gathered all together and placed on one heap (*unum cumulum*), their height will stand as if some other world (*mundus alius*) is described, all concentrated in one single spot." Pliny gives the impression that the *Urbs* could replace the original world by offering, in its own area, a new and complete idea of the diversity of the wonders and masterpieces of the world. The image of the heap (*cumulus*) reminds us of the importance of the principle of accumulation in Pliny's work – a work which is supposed to accumulate all the knowledge relative to life in order to show the diversity of a world now wholly dominated by Rome –, and it may have been used by Pliny to prove that because of the quantity of monuments which piled up in its centre, and the quality of each of these monuments (presented in § 102), Rome itself was an Eighth Wonder of the world which surpassed all the Wonders the World previously enumerated (Naas, *Le Projet Encyclopédique*, p. 1-2; 207-208).

Moreover, in this paragraph, Rome's wonders are explicitly connected with victory: "to show (*ostendere*) that here, as well [i.e. for everything apart from military victories], she has submitted the whole world (*terrarum orbem victum*)." The uses of the verbs *vincere* and *ostendere* clearly echo triumphal vocabulary, suggesting that Rome's



wonders can be compared to war trophies because they are objects brought back as booty, or funded by booty, this is for instance the case with the forum of Augustus or with the [Temple of Peace](#) later mentioned (Naas, *Le Projet Encyclopédique*, p. 374-375). The image of the *cumulus* of Roman monuments is surprising because of its careless connotation, but Pliny may have used it to continue the military comparison (the *cumulus* of wonders would thus be the equivalent of a heap of booty), and also to prove that even if the wonders are placed in such an indifferent way, they would still be far more superior to those of the rest of the world (Naas, *Le Projet Encyclopédique*, p. 375). The other world (*mundus alius*) that Pliny describes as being formed by the impressive, and of course hyperbolic, height of Rome's wonders, would thus logically be a world whose geography was mainly organised by the uncountable monumental recordings of Rome's victories. As Sorcha Carey rightly remarks, if Agrippa's map (completed in 2 BCE, displayed in the Porticus Vipsania, and whose aspect is still largely debated) showed the whole *orbis terrarum* to the people of Rome, Pliny, through the image of endless *cumulus* of Roman monuments, invites us to look at "how Rome has conquered the world" (Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture*, p. 72-74).

§ 102 is the beginning of Pliny's presentation of Rome's *miraculae*, and it enumerates five of the eighteen wonders of Rome highlighted by Pliny: Julius Caesar's Circus Maximus, the Basilica of Paulus, or Basilica Aemilia, the forum of Augustus, the [Temple of Peace](#), and the roof of Agrippa's *Diribitorium* (a room on the Campus Martius dedicated to the counting of votes). In this enumeration, the forum of Augustus and the Temple of Peace are two monuments which are really interesting to study in connection with Pliny's message in this passage. As Valérie Naas has rightly recalled, both monuments had been built thanks to booty collected during military campaigns, and they had both been consecrated to peace. In addition, they were both constructed to celebrate a political change: the settlement of the Principate for Augustus, and some kind of restoration of the Augustan model and of peace for the Flavians (Naas, *Le Projet Encyclopédique*, p. 439). It is important to remember that the *Natural History* had been dedicated in 77 CE, two years after the dedication of the Temple of Peace. By putting the Temple of Peace in the list of Rome's wonders, Pliny may have had in mind its recent dedication. The Temple of Peace was built to commemorate the victory of Vespasian and Titus in Judea, to celebrate the restoration of stability in the Empire, and to represent the universality of Rome's power, as it exhibited the most beautiful and precious masterpieces of the world, among which were the treasures of the Temple of Jerusalem, masterpieces which had been obtained by Rome after conquests (on the Temple of Peace and its integration into the Flavian architectural program in Rome, partly influenced by the commemoration of the victory in Judea, see Millar, "Last Year in Jerusalem"; Gallia, "Remaking Rome"; Naas, *Le Projet Encyclopédique*, p. 438-446). Because of its characteristics, the Temple of Peace could thus represent for Pliny the twin aims of his encyclopaedic project which sought to prove the reality of the "universalist ambition" of the Roman Empire (Naas, *Le Projet Encyclopédique*, p. 443). In addition, the fact that the Temple of Peace itself was a sort of "temple-museum," gathering in one place the most beautiful masterpieces taken by the Romans to many peoples all over the world, may directly echo Pliny's words in our text about the fact that these wonders formed some kind of "other world." In a way, the various wonders of Rome mentioned by Pliny, which he presents as being at least as numerous as Rome's victories, could be perceived as representing some kind of macro-model of the masterpieces exposed in the temple of Peace (Naas, *Le Projet Encyclopédique*, p. 445).

The link between conquests, victories, and universal domination is thus reasserted in this text of Pliny through the theme of Rome's monumental finery. Two levels of understanding are present in this text. First, it proves that even in the architectural field, Rome surpasses all the other Wonders of the World, as it is itself a kind of 'super Eighth Wonder of the World.' Rome has not only conquered the world with arms, she has also defeated all the other nations from a cultural point of view. Such an idea is developed in a quite similar way in Pliny's praise of Italy, when he writes that Italy unified the world thanks to the spread of Latin and by bringing *humanitas*, civilisation, to all foreign peoples ([Pliny the Elder, Natural History III.38-39](#)). Second, by specifying that Rome has at least as many monuments as victories, and that taken all together, these buildings formed some kind of "other world," Pliny may mean that Rome's monumental centre offered, in elevation, a new geography of a world submitted to Roman domination. In the rest of his enumeration of Rome's wonders, Pliny's tone changes, as he then stresses the fact that some Roman buildings surpassed the *vanitas* of the pyramids and the labyrinths. The rest of the enumeration is thus a succession of positive (the splendid buildings from the time of Augustus, Claudius, and Vespasian; but also the useful ones such as the sewers and the water supply) and negative models of wonder (the buildings from the time of Caligula and Nero), which show that Pliny wanted to present Rome as the greatest Wonder of the World, but that his moralizing perspective also compelled him to recall that excessive luxury and eccentricity had to be prohibited (Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture*, p. 95-99; Isager, *Pliny on Art*, p. 197-205).



Keywords in the original language:

- [basilica](#)
- [circus](#)
- [cumulus](#)
- [forum divi Augusti](#)
- [magnitudo](#)
- [miraculum](#)
- [mundus](#)
- [opus](#)
- [orbis terrarum](#)
- [templum Pacis](#)
- [universitas](#)
- [urbs](#)
- [Vespasianus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [cultural hegemony](#)
- [monument](#)
- [Roman conquests](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Temple of Peace](#)
- [victory](#)
- [wonder](#)

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Praise of Italy.

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Architecture

[The Temple of Peace \(Rome\)](#)



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