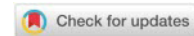


# SENECA'S NATURAL QUESTIONS AND JOACHIM DU BELLAY'S RUINS OF ROME: ECHOES FROM SENECA'S STOICISM IN THE FRENCH COLLECTION OF POEMS

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**Abstract:** The aim of this research paper is to explore the influence of Seneca's stoicism from his Natural Questions on Joachim du Bellay's collection of poems Ruins of Rome (Les Antiquités de Rome). Even though Seneca's most widely read Stoic text is Letters to Lucilius, in this paper the attention is on his other work Natural Questions. In this long philosophical treatise, he discusses the origin of the meteorological phenomena while also embodying views of Stoic physics. The stoic concept of determinism, the interchangeability of the matter, the cause and effect chain, the existence of the supreme deity governing the world are some of the points also found in the chosen poetic work from the French poet Joachim du Bellay. As one of the most important figures in the French poetry of the 16th century and the author of the manifesto of the literary group Pléiade, Joachim du Bellay's contribution to French poetry must not be forgotten – he has introduced new literary forms into French language such as odes, love sonnets and even satiric sonnets. For this paper, the focus is on his collection of 32 sonnets named Ruins of Rome, which illustrates the meditation on the city's ruin and, in general, the meditation on the human condition. Although the critics have already acknowledged the significant influence of Latin and Greek poets in this Du Bellay's poetic work, especially the influence of Stoics such as Cicero, Lucan, Virgil and even Seneca, the relation between this specific Seneca's work and Du Bellay's Ruins of Rome has not yet been studied in detail. The goal is to show how the French poet has incorporated Seneca's stoicism as presented in Natural Questions, what is similar in expression or in thought, or what is adapted in the collection of poems The Ruins of Rome. The findings of this paper will unravel that Du Bellay's work is full of philosophical evocations of Seneca's Natural Questions and that the engagement with Seneca's stoicism leads to understanding of the vanished glories of one the most powerful empires, Roman Empire. Through the illustration of Roman Empire and its inevitable decay Du Bellay mirrors the human destiny. Punished by the fate, the city fell into its abyss as a consequence of its hubris, which should serve as a warning of a perilous flaw that excessive pride is.

**Keywords:** Ruins of Rome, Joachim du Bellay, stoicism, Seneca, Natural Questions

**Field:** Humanities, Social Sciences

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Joachim du Bellay was a 16th century French Renaissance poet, widely known as one of the leaders (with Pierre de Ronsard) of the group of the French poets La Pléiade and the one who signed the group's manifesto Defense and illustration of the French language (La Défense et illustration de la langue française). He left a permanent mark in the history of French literature because he is the one who had introduced odes, love sonnets and satiric sonnets to French poetry.

While many influences can be traced throughout his poetic production, our attention is on the impact of the philosophical school of Stoics. Du Bellay endorsed certain Stoic positions after discovering the work of the famous Stoic representatives such as Cicero, Virgil, Lucan, Seneca. In Du Bellay's manifesto Defense and illustration of the French language, certain citations from Ciceronian texts, important sources on Stoic ethics and theology, are visible (Fujitani, 2010, p. 66). As a translator of one of the books from Virgil's Aeneid, he discovered his work and borrowed the idea of the association of the universal city with the city of Rome (Ternaux, 1994, p. 231). Evocation of Lucan and his Pharsale are numerous in the Ruins of Rome, just to mention few of them: the battle of Pharsale mentioned in the sonnet XXXI from Du Bellay's collection is interpreted as the ending of the City of Seven Mounts, symbol of the end of the universe (Ternaux, 1994, p. 234), the borrowed image of a negative fortune of Rome from Pharsale is amplified by Du Bellay's decision to add the role of the cosmic violence (Liaroutzos, 2013, p. 78) etc. Echoes from the Seneca's work are also found: On providence (De Providentia) in two of Du Bellay's sonnet collections Ruins of Rome (Les Antiquités de Rome) and Regrets (Les Regrets), On Tranquility of Mind (De tranquillitate animi) in Regrets and On Anger (De ira) in Du Bellay's latin elegy Neminem aliena iniuria miserum esse (Fujitani, 2010, p. 83; Ternaux, 1994, p. 241).

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This paper aims to prove that the ethical Stoic views from Seneca's Natural Questions (*Naturales quaestiones*) influenced the poetic work of Du Bellay, specifically the Roman sonnet collection titled *Ruins of Rome*. Despite the fact that Natural Questions represent the work which examines the questions concerning meteorology and the origin of nature, throughout the moralizing passages of its seven books Seneca has incorporated beliefs of Stoic physics. Some of them are rather present in the *Ruins of Rome* and our goal is to shed light on them.

## 2. SENECA'S STOICISM FROM NATURAL QUESTIONS IN JOACHIM DU BELLAY'S RUINS OF ROME

Joachim du Bellay wrote *Ruins of Rome* during a long stay in Rome from 1553 to 1557 and published them upon his return to France in 1558. This poetic work consists of 32 sonnets that evoke the meditation of the ruins of the once admirable city of Rome. Whole collection is based on a striking contrast: the poet combines the images of his admiration for the once influential city and his disappointment and regret for the loss of that power. The antithesis between lines 13 and 14 of the sonnet XXIX is a suitable example of the representation of the past grandeur and decadence of Rome in the same sonnet – the poet combines two opposing conditions of the city: the ancient Rome was the world's ornament and now, it's nothing but the world's grave. Moreover, Du Bellay's decision to write a collection of poems about the decline of the power of the Eternal city and its peak can be seen as a sign of the influence of Seneca's attitude concerning the destiny of powerful empires: "[A]ncient empires have collapsed at the peak of their prosperity..." (*Natural Questions* 3.3.9). The moment when Rome reaches the highest degree of its power and wants to expand it, is the moment when it crumbles (*sonnet XXXI*, lines 12–14).

The ninth sonnet of *Ruins of Rome* is marked by the stoicism – from the beginning, the poet invokes the heaven, the stars, the gods and the nature, trying to understand the cause of the fall of this empire; he is questioning the heaven in order to unfold the truth: is that the doing of the cruel fate or something else (punishment of some sorts):

Ye cruell stares, and eke ye Gods unkinde,  
Heaven envious, and bitter stepdame Nature,  
Be it by fortune, or by course of kinde  
That ye doo weld th'affaires of earthlie creature. (*sonnet IX*, lines 1–4)

In the next strophe, he contemplates gods' decision to create this world if the Roman Empire, symbol of the whole civilization, cannot persist; however, the answer to his questions is revealed in the final line of the sonnet: "That all this whole shall one day come to nought." (*sonnet IX*, line 14). This maxim appears again when the poet compares the cycle of water with the city's destiny, just to conclude that "Her power disperst, through all the world did vade/To shew that all in th'end to nought shall fade" (*sonnet XX*, lines 13–14). It must be remembered that for Stoics, God can be interpreted as fate, providence (*Natural Questions* 2.45.2), nature or world (*Natural Questions* 2.45.3), but as we can notice in the ninth sonnet, for Du Bellay, God and nature are not the same, but it is in fact the God (or the heaven, which is more frequently used in his poems) who controls the destiny.

The French poet shares Stoics beliefs "in insisting upon [f]ate and personal choice as the two fundamental causal forces in human history" (Fujitani, 2010, p. 77). In Du Bellay's universe, the mentioned personal choice is the hubris of Romans. Stoicism holds that everything that happens is the result of the unfolding of the fate (*Natural Questions* 2.34.3; 2.35.2; 2.36). Therefore, every single thing is predetermined, including the decadence of the city of Rome, meaning that even without the spectacle of Romans' hubris, they would have been punished, the Romans' arrogance has just accelerated the process. The fratricide of Remus, Rome's original sin, described in the sonnet XXIV, can be considered a premonition for the future destruction of the Empire, which later happened. Even though Du Bellay ponders on the cause of the internal unrest in the city on multiple occasions, and always includes the Stoics fate: "Was this (ye Romanes) your hard destinie? /Or some old sinne, whose unappeased guilt/ Powr'd vengeance forth on you eternallie?" (*sonnet XXIV*, lines 9–11), he settles on the fact that because of the blood spilled by the brother's hands (allusion on the city's origin), the God, the destiny, couldn't let the city be immortal and the punishment was inevitable. Thus, Romans' defeat, was not only written in the stars, but also fueled by their vanity to try to equal Gods, that resulted in the piteous loss of power.

While describing the birth of the internal conflict, in the tenth sonnet, Du Bellay mentions the renewal of the fraternal rage, this time in the hearts of the citizens, which directly links to the beginnings of Rome. The poet also stresses that the history has repeated itself – same fury that has blinded their ancestors,

tarnished once more souls of the Romans. Seneca states the same while insisting that vices and greed "are not new but inherited from long ago" (Natural Questions 5.15.2) Not only that but he also compares the world's cycle to a life of a human being while explaining Stoics point of view on the "conflagration of the universe". He states:

"Whether the world is a soul, or a body under the government of nature, like trees and crops, it embraces in its constitution all that it is destined to experience actively or passively from its beginning right on to its end; it resembles a human being, all whose capacities are wrapped up in the embryo before birth." (Natural Questions 3.29.2)

In other words, every being has a "seed" in which its death is written (Natural Questions 3.28.2-3). The ancestors are the ones who planted the seed that contains the city's destiny (sonnet XIX). In sonnet XXX, Du Bellay describes Rome as a field of wheat while implicitly showing us the whole cycle of world, its beginning and its end: we remark a contrast between a ripe field of wheat, a symbol of the Roman growth and a harvested, destroyed field, a devastating image of the barbaric destruction of the city and the end of Rome's reign. The end of a Roman civilization is a way of showing that a human life is finite. Everything is "enslaved to fate" (Natural Questions 6.1.14), nothing is durable. A clear-cut example for the presence of the said determinism in Du Bellay's poems is the image of the city, which has reached a culmination point of its power, mercilessly tarnished by the sovereignty of time:

And how that she, which with her mightie power  
Tam'd all the world, hath tam'd herselfe at last  
The pray of time, which all things doth devowre. (sonnet III, lines 6–8)

The one who acquired everything is seen as the victim of the time's ruthless indifference. If we observe a bigger picture and analyze the exterior connection between sonnets, we can discover another concept of the Stoics', unity of elements in the cosmos. Seneca's position on the mutability of the elements (Natural Questions 3.10.3) inspired certain poems of the collection. After demonstrating the unification of numerous elements in one unity in sonnets XVI and XX, the French poet shows the image of Rome being torn apart; the disharmony between the elements provokes the end of the world (Toulze-Morisset, 2008). The reduction of the elements that Rome consisted of, in the sonnet XXII, is a reminder that everything returns to its earliest form. That is an apt metaphoric description of the Stoics' doctrine of eternal recurrence:

So when the compast course of the universe  
In sixe and thirtie thousand years is ronne,  
The bands of th'elements shall backe reverse

To their first discord, and be quite undonne:  
The seeds, of which all things at first were bred,  
Shall in great Chaos wombe againe be hid. (sonnet XXII, lines 9–14)

The poet has also borrowed the motif of the elements of water, wind, fire and earth, present in Seneca's work, to depict, what Tucker (1990) emphasizes to be "the cyclical rise and fall of individual empires...", which is in fact just a traditional concept of *translatio imperii*, while making city "a place of burial", the end of the world (p. 101). While summarizing the contrast between rise and fall of the empires in general, in quatrains and first tercet of the sixteenth sonnet, Du Bellay insists on the swiftness and the suddenness of the loss of the power (the presence of adverb suddenly and adjective dreadful confirm that emphasis), the concept already explained in Natural Questions (Natural Questions 3.27.1). In the ultimate tercet, the fate of Rome is the same as every empire's:

So whilom did this Monarchie aspyre  
As waves, as winde, as fire spred over all,  
Till it by fatall doome adowne did fall. (sonnet XVI, lines 12–14)

Images of the culmination and then the ending of tidal wave, storm and conflagration are summarized in the collapsing of the City of Seven Mounts.

Olivier Pot (1994) concludes that this collection of poems shows tragic meditation of the world's destiny (p. 21). If we incorporate his opinion into Du Bellay's Stoic view, Empire's demise is in fact the end

of the world. Even with the use of certain rimes, the poet seeks to provide the relation between the city's and human's destiny – Floyd Gray (1993) recognizes that in Romain he “hears” main and humain, the spectacle of the foundation and punishment of the city (p. 45). Those rimes are unfortunately not kept in the English translation of the collection. Joachim du Bellay has also succeeded in incorporating the Stoic cosmopolitanism, an idea that all humans are part of the universal city, in the image of the city of Rome: Rome is considered to be a map of the world, even whole world (sonnet XVI), center of all the mankind's wealth and culture (sonnet XXIX), the planet is not enough to represent its power as it can be seen in lines 3 and 4 of the sonnet VIII: “Both land and sea in roundes had survew'd/ To be the measure of her bredth and length”. Du Bellay accentuates the same thing, the Rome's greatness, in different poems by using various hyperboles, a manner borrowed from Seneca himself, who proclaims the same thing few times in a slightly different way (Natural Questions 4b.11) only if it's an essential point (Natural Questions 2.21.4).

On the one hand, the fall of Rome means the ending of the whole civilization, but on the other hand it could be an opportunity for the new beginning – in the Stoic universe, the commencement of the new world's cycle. While explaining the reason for the destructive appearance of tide and conflagration, Seneca argues that they serve as God's agents to accelerate the changing of the world. In other words, when judged appropriate, to prevent the “world's revolution”, God ends this world for the new one (Natural Questions 3.28.7). That “revolution” in Du Bellay's work is presented as the City's hubris, the arrogant attitude, the belief that the Empire could be equal to the gods, which is proven impossible. The Rome's ruin is in fact the inevitable ending of this mortal world, as foreseen by Seneca himself – “[F]rom the first day of the world... the date when the earth would be drowned was decreed” (Natural Questions 3.30.1). Additionally, the prophecy cannot be changed even in Du Bellay's poetic universe.

The Stoic's theory of the existence of God is explained by Seneca, who says that God is “[t]he intelligence of universe... All that you see and all that you do not see. Only then is his true greatness recognized – greatness than which nothing greater can be imagined” (Natural Questions 1. praef 13). Graver (2020) remarks that with these statements, Seneca denies Epicurean theology that postulates for unlikelihood of the God's association with the events that occur on this world (p. 492). Similarly, Du Bellay accepts the involvement of the divine in the human's world. In eighteenth sonnet, the course of history of Rome is distinguishable: from the period where it was only a field of pastors to the period of Republic and Empire, until the heaven gave a power to the pope, which is important because the history can start over again (Szeliga, 2022, p. 158); the figure of the pope Paul IV “closes the historic cycle which began with pagan pastors Romulus and Remus”. (Ternaux, 1994, p. 231). To prevent the expansion of an already excessive Rome's power, God chose to interfere and enable the new beginning:

Till th'heaven it selfe opposing gainst her might,  
Her power to Peters successor betooke,  
Who shepheardlike (as fates the same foreseeing)  
Doth shew, that all things turne to their first being. (sonnet XVIII, lines 10–14)

As seen above, Du Bellay is in accord with Seneca's Stoic approach. When further explaining the supreme deity, Seneca states that even though the events are predetermined, God has an option to change them because “he is his own necessity” (Natural Questions 1. praef 3). Whenever he estimates appropriate, he can act with the best intentions (Graver, 2023, p. 80), that is why God is able to meddle with the city's destiny. This observation leads to a reflection that it is even in God's hands to make happen or destroy civilization and leave nothing (Natural Questions 3 1. praef 9). That idea is applied in Du Bellay's sonnet XI: God, hidden behind the image of Mars, created a new civilization in order to make them violently vanquish the presumptuous Romans. After completing the assignment, God also annihilated the new race so that no one could reach the Roman power and repeat their sin.

However, Seneca sees the cycle of the human's sin repeating in every new world because “[v]irtue is difficult to discover; it needs a guide and leader; vice is learned even without a teacher” (Natural Questions 3.30.8). That means that lesson from the past is not learned, history repeats itself as also presented by Du Bellay. The renewal of the “first” fraternal strife reappears with the start of the war between Cesar and Pompey (Sonnet X). The uncontrollable ambition disturbs the harmony and leads to the inevitable downfall. Following the example of the Roman destiny, the poet “deducts the laws applicable for the whole humanity” (Lionetto, 2021, p. 2) because it's the fault of humans that ruination occurs as they weren't content with what the nature and gods left them and wanted more (Natural Questions 5.18.13; 5.18.15).

Thus, this collection of poems should be observed as an illustration of the lesson that no empire can last, that every power comes to an end (Crescenzo, 1994, p. 45), most of the time as a consequence of

its own greed (Gadoffre, 1978, p. 112). In greater context, Ruins of Rome are an excellent representation of the vanity of everything (Prélat, 2022, p. 65) and, as already mentioned in the paragraph above, the universe's destiny through the picture of Rome (Gadoffre, 1978, p. 141). These interpretations of Du Bellay's Ruins of Rome are possible due to application of Seneca's stoic passages into the universe of this poetic collection.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Encountered with Stoic poets through his translator's work, Du Bellay has incorporated, consciously or not, a bit of their beliefs into his work. After this profound analysis we can conclude that in Du Bellay's Ruins of Rome, strong echoes of Seneca's attitudes demonstrated in Natural Questions can be found. Seneca's concept of God, determinism, interchangeability of elements, inevitability of death and even traces of Stoic universalism are present in Ruins of Rome. Joachim du Bellay has masterfully linked the mentioned Seneca's positions with the Rome's hubris into his poetic universe of Ruins of Rome in order to understand the cause of Rome's ruin. In spite of the fact that Du Bellay condemns the destiny (the stars and the gods), he also denounces Romans' vanity, as one of the causes of Rome's decadence. Although everything is predestined, including the city's wreck, and the fact that death cannot be escaped, the overflowing human arrogance has also contributed to the degradation of Rome by making the heaven interfere to punish Rome and lead the city earlier to its destruction.

Due to application of mentioned Stoics' beliefs, the poet used the city's destiny to play the role of the fate of the humankind. Furthermore, the reading of Ruins of Rome must be a reminder that the outcome of an excessive need of power that transforms into the overabundant vanity always leads to the defeat.

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