*Scientia*, or “certain knowledge,” in the early modern period depended on a vast terrain of assumptions and philosophies, practices and interests, that were integral to the demands and contingencies of a way of life completely different from our own. The structures by which knowledge was produced and the questions that seemed most urgent to put to rest occupied early modern scholars and practitioners in ways that it is difficult to recover with much subtlety. Burning questions of the day included not whether the philosopher’s stone existed, but rather how one should go about finding it (the same went for dragons). Should statues dug out of the earth be considered to share properties with fossils, similarly found? Is there anyone who can parse Vitruvius’ disappointingly vague Latin with enough delicacy to figure out how he said to carve an Ionic volute while maintaining the same proportions all the way through? Does the earth rise in some seasons because, being warmed, it manages to dissipate some of its heavier, more melancholic humors? This last question was hotly debated in the middle of the sixteenth century by two men passionate about the pursuit of natural knowledge — one a fencer, the other a poet — and the conversation took place in a papal palace in Rome.

Early modern historians of natural knowledge, like the subjects of their scholarship, need to comprehend the early modern value of playing music (harmony of the spheres), of making maps (discovering new lands to plunder for riches, or people to convert), of alchemy and astrology (particularly if you wanted to work at court). We have had to become cognizant of all the many disciplines that produced knowledge in the early modern period, and also to become interpreters of why such knowledge was necessary. At the 2007 NERC we wish to come together to ask how interdisciplinary work in historically based studies is different from, or compatible with, interdisciplinary work in ahistorical sciences and social sciences. To that end, we would like to bring together people who are testing the limits of their disciplines as they question structures of knowledge in the Renaissance and early modern period.

The 2007 NERC, “Nature’s Disciplines,” will be held at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, in mid-October. Detailed information will be forthcoming; meanwhile, questions can be directed to the organizers: Evelyn Lincoln (Evelyn_Lincoln@brown.edu), Tara Nummedal (Tara_Nummedal@brown.edu), and Nícolas Wey-Gómez (Nicolas_Wey-Gomez@brown.edu).