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Pliny the Younger: citizen, landowner, intellectual

V.O. Nikishin  

Moscow State University named after M.V. Lomonosov,
building 27, block 4, Lomonosovsky prospect, Moscow, Russian Federation, 119234

 cicero74@mail.ru

Abstract. Pliny the Younger is a statesman, writer and lawyer, the author of the only correspondence between the governor of the province and the emperor that has survived to this day. The relevance of the research topic is due to the stereotyped idea formed in historiography of Pliny the Younger as an apologist for Emperor Trajan and an indecisive manager who, for any reason, asked for the authoritative opinion of his august patron. The relevance of the research topic is due to the stereotyped idea formed in historiography of Pliny the Younger as an apologist for Emperor Trajan and an indecisive manager who, for any reason, asked for the authoritative opinion of his august patron. The purpose of the study is to reveal those aspects of the multifaceted personality of Pliny the Younger, which usually remain in the shadow of the usual image of a clever courtier and mediocre administrator. The author considered such facets of Pliny the Younger's activity as housekeeping and literary creativity. Conclusions: despite the fact that Pliny the Younger began his career under the tyrannical regime of Domitian, he managed to maintain his self-esteem and remain true to his own ideas of honor, duty and conscience. Being generally indifferent to the economy, Pliny the Younger devoted most of his time to literary works, philosophy and rhetoric.

Keywords: Domitian, Nerva, Trajan, Tacitus, Antonines, Bithynia, Principate, epistolary genre

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Плиний Младший: гражданин, землевладелец, интеллектуал

В.О. Никишин  

Московский государственный университет им. М.В. Ломоносова,
119234, Российская Федерация, Москва, Ломоносовский проспект, д. 27, корп. 4

 cicer074@mail.ru

Аннотация. Актуальность темы исследования обусловлена сформировавшимся в историографии стереотипным представлением о Плинии Младшем как апологете императора Траяна и нерешительном управленце, который по любому поводу запрашивал авторитетное мнение своего августейшего патрона. Источником такого представления стали «Панегирик», адресованный императору, и X книга «Писем», содержащая переписку Плиния Младшего с Траяном. Цель работы — выявить те аспекты многогранной личности Плиния Младшего, которые обычно остаются в тени привычного образа ловкого придворного и посредственного администратора. Особый интерес представляет выявление гражданской позиции Плиния Младшего. Автор также рассмотрел такие грани его деятельности, как занятия хозяйством и литературное творчество. Опираясь на данные «Писем», исследователь пришел к выводу о том, что к хозяйству Плиний Младший был равнодушен и почти им не занимался, тогда как основная часть его времени была посвящена литературным трудам, философии и риторике.

Ключевые слова: Домициан, Нерва, Траян, Тацит, Антонины, Вифиния, сенат, принципат, эпистолярный жанр

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Introduction

An illustrious writer and lawyer of the era of Trajan, a prominent representative of the ruling elite, a statesman, a senator and a personal friend of the emperor, the richest magnate — and at the same time a witty conversationalist, a courteous person, a faithful friend, a hospitable and welcoming host... All these epithets refer to Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (c. 61–113), or Pliny the Younger, as he is usually called, so as not to be confused with his great uncle, Pliny the Elder, who was an equally distinguished writer, an administrator and a statesman. Pliny the Younger took

his place of honor in the history of Roman literature thanks to his Letters in 10 books that have survived up to nowadays and the Panegyric, written in honour of Emperor Trajan — “the best princeps” (*princeps optimus*), a friend and patron of our hero. Having made an enviable political career during the odious reign of Domitian (81–96), Pliny never made a deal with his conscience; as a citizen (in the modern sense of the word), a public person and a statesman, he was always distinguished by his high integrity.

Civil position of Pliny

So, in his letter to senator Julius Valerian we read: “Imagine how delighted I am that I have always made a point of refusing for my services as counsel not only to enter into any understanding to receive presents and gifts in any shape, but even friendly acknowledgments! We ought indeed to refrain from doing anything that is not quite honourable, not because it is forbidden, but because we should be ashamed to do it” (Ep. V.13.8-9, hereinafter trans. by J.B. Firth). The model of civic courage and genuine ancient *virtus* in the eyes of Pliny was Senator Junius Mauricus (brother of Junius Arulen Rusticus, who was executed by the order of Domitian in 93; the latter sent Mauricus into exile, then he was returned by Nerva), who used to tell the rulers the whole truth to face without trepidation (Ep. IV.22.4-6).

Despite his friendship with Trajan (98–117), Pliny was not going to remain silent “about the many shortcomings in the state” (*de pluribus vitiis civitatis*) (Ep. VI.2.9). Undoubtedly, his civil position, which almost cost him his life during the tyranny of Domitian (he, in contrast to Trajan, *princeps pessimus*), deserves all respect. A champion of the ancient *virtus* and the “covenants of the ancestors” (*mores maiorum*), Pliny was a staunch conservative: he was zealous of the authority (*auctoritas*) of the senate and very painfully perceived those episodes when the senators “lost face” and showed unworthy fawning and cringing in the face of despotic power (Ep. VII.29.1-4; VIII.6.1-17). Pliny wrote about his civic position as follows: “When Domitian was put to death, I took counsel with myself and came to the conclusion that there was now a splendid and glorious opportunity for prosecuting the guilty, vindicating the oppressed, and at the same time bringing myself into prominence” (Ep. IX.13.2). So he became a court speaker and a lawyer.

Pliny — magnate

Pliny the Younger was a latifundist [see: 3] and a very rich man. His will, specifically, evidences it; he himself admits in one of his letters that he sometimes remembers of his duty as an owner and a landlord, mounts a horse and goes

around his estates (Ep. IX.15.3). What is the origin of these land profusion? As V.I. Kuzishchin writes, Pliny “united in his hands the land holdings that belonged to the family of his father, a noble citizen of Como, and his mother, who had several estates in the vicinity of Como. The third wife of Pliny was also a native of Como, a representative of the local noble local family of Calpurnius Fabatus, who probably had land property located on the territory of the same town as part of her dotal property. He combined the land holdings that had previously belonged to three noble and wealthy families that led to the creation of a very large estate. Later, throughout his life, Pliny continued to expand his land property on the territory of Como” [4. S. 110–111]. He received some part of this lands by inheritance (Ep. V.7.1; VII.11.14), the rest he acquired occasionally [4. S. 111, approx. 742]. Pliny himself calls his estates “*mei agri*” (Ep. VII.18.2); he colorfully and enthusiastically describes the villas in Laurent and Tusculum in letters addressed to his friends Gallus and Domitius Apollinaris (Ep. II.17.1-29; V.6.1-45). However, Pliny can hardly be called a zealous owner, because in order to seriously engage in farming, he lacked neither the time, nor the strength, nor the desire.

Intellectual activity of Pliny

What did he spend his time and energy on? We should not forget that Pliny the Younger was one of the most famous statesmen, court orators and writers of the Trajan era. He wrote in Latin and Greek, being, like every intellectual of the Roman Empire, a man of “two languages” (*utrumque linguarum*). He was a very prolific writer, poet and prosaist, the author of a number of judicial and political speeches, poems and other works (only the Panegyric to Emperor Trajan and Letters in 10 books have survived). We can say that Pliny the Younger is a recognised classic of such a small literary form as epistolary genre. “The attraction of “epistle” as a genre for a writer lies in the ability to combine many varieties: the scale extends from high historiographical and oratory forms to the discussion of agricultural problems and everyday playful chatter” [1. S. 1250]. In the time of Pliny, as I.M. Tronsky writes, “artistic “epistle” becomes the same instrument of literary fixation of a single life fact or emotional mood at a certain specific moment, as epigrams, “*silvae*” or odes and messages of Horace were in poetry” [7. S. 436].

The Letters of Pliny the Younger is “a work of art created by the author according to a certain plan, but not a randomly selected home archive published in the chronological order of writing the letters or without any order at all” [6. S. 158–159]. According to M. von Albrecht, “it is impossible to prove that Pliny published his letters in “triads”. The letters, like the Panegyric, were revised before being published” [1. S. 1249]. According to V.S. Sokolov, Pliny “himself intended his letters for publication, specially

finished them, processed, polished” [6. S. 17]. Finally, “most likely, Pliny made a selection from his real correspondence and published it in a revised form” [1. S. 1252].

None of the letters was dated by the author himself. In total, Pliny has 96 addressees, including such famous writers as historian Cornelius Tacitus and biographer Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. Eleven letters are addressed to the first — more than to anyone else, the second Pliny calls his “younger friend”, *contubernalis* (Ep. I.24.1). But mostly the Letters are addressed to unknown to us, quite ordinary people (*obscuri*). The invariably benevolent and delicate Secundus in his letters speaks badly only of odious personalities like Regulus, the famous informer of the time of Domitian (Ep. I.5.1-15). “Pliny masterfully depicts not only individuals, but also mass scenes. With extraordinary liveliness, he presents us with stormy meetings of the Senate, where everything is dramatized: the speech of individual speakers, the vote of senators, participation of the princeps himself in these meetings [6. S. 150].

Many of Pliny’s writings have not come down to us, such as the book “Vengeance for Helvidius”, which the author published after the assassination of Domitian (September 96). It was an apologia for senator Helvidius Priscus the Younger, who fell victim to tyranny. Then Pliny himself almost died (Ep. III.11.3). Certainly, he welcomed the coming to power of Nerva (96–98), when the Romans, according to Tacitus, experienced a rare happiness, “when everyone can think what he wants and say what he thinks” (Tac. Hist. I. 1). But since even with “the best princeps” it was no longer possible to return to a full-fledged political life with its inherent competitive struggle in the forum (because the process of turning a citizen into a subject had gone too far by that time), Pliny had to deal with the daily routine of office, sitting or making speeches in court and the senate, which, of course, weighed on him. In one of his letters he wrote that he was involuntarily imprisoned in “narrow limits” (*angustis terminis*) (Ep. IX.2.3). Significantly, he made a fundamental decision for himself: “But that is all the more reason why we should apply all the fleeting, rushing moments at our disposal, if not to great achievements — for these may be destined for other hands than ours — at least to study, and why, as long life is denied us, we should leave behind us some memorial that we have lived” (Ep. III.7.14). He wrote a lot, despite the well-known workload of court cases [6. S. 36] and, last but not least, household chores. Like his uncle, Pliny had an enviable diligence and perseverance. In one of his letters we read: “Let us therefore prosecute our studies, and not allow the idleness of other people to be an excuse for laziness on our part. We can still find an audience and readers, provided only that our compositions are worth hearing, and worth the paper they are written on” (Ep. IV.16.3). Of course, he compared himself with his uncle: “So I often smile when some of my friends call me a book-worm, for if I compare myself with him I am but a shocking idler” (Ep. III.5.19).

How did Pliny work? “He did not give himself rest either during walks, or when he went somewhere, sitting in a sedan chair. He did not part with the tablets and the stylus, even when he went hunting or traveling around the outlying cities of the province of Bithynia entrusted to his administration. Finally, the same literary interests forced him to attend public readings and edit other people’s works” [6. S. 52]. Indeed, Pliny wrote not only in the quiet of his study, but also on the road, and even in nature (Ep. I.6.1-3; IX.10.2). He used to first think over the text, then dictate it to his secretary, then he checked and edited what had been written (Ep. IX.36.2-4; 40.2). Undoubtedly, Pliny was a perfectionist, as evidenced by his words: “It is my wish that people should think my last book is always the most perfect” (Ep. VIII.3.2). With such an attitude to work, the versatility of Pliny’s creative nature and the versatility of Pliny’s interests coexisted. Here is his credo: “Just as it is preferable to do one thing really well than many things only fairly well, so it is better to attain moderate proficiency, if one cannot produce a masterpiece. That is the principle I have gone on in experimenting with various kinds of literary studies, owing to the fact that I do not feel sure of myself in any one of them” (Ep. IX.29.1). He could not stop writing; in one of his letters Pliny confesses: “I find in study both delight and consolation. There is nothing in the world so pleasant as to give more pleasure than study can bestow, and there is no sorrow so grievous that it cannot alleviate” (Ep. VIII.19.1).

One of Pliny’s hobbies was poetry. He spoke of his poetic experiments in the following way: “It is remarkable how these trifles sharpen a man’s wits and at the same time give relaxation to the brain. For they range over love, hatred, anger, pity, mirth — every feeling, in a word, that meets us in everyday life, in the forum, or in the courts. They serve the same useful purpose as other verses, for as soon as we are freed from the exigencies of metre, we take pleasure in fluent prose and our pens run on with greater zest when we have tried both and comparison tells us which is the easier” (Ep. VII.9.13-14). Pliny assured that he did not take his poetic works seriously, calling them “trinkets” (*nugae*) (Ep. IV.14.8; VII.2.2; IX.25.1). For these “trinkets” the author was good-naturedly scolded by his friends, who considered them unworthy of his talents (Ep. V.3.1; VII.4.1). Pliny himself claimed that he wrote poetry for pleasure: “You will receive with this letter some hendecasyllables of mine with which I pass my leisure hours pleasantly when driving, or in the bath, or at dinner. They contain my jests, my sportive fancies, my loves, sorrows, displeasures and wrath, described sometimes in a humble, sometimes in a lofty strain. My object has been to please different tastes by this variety of treatment, and I hope that certain pieces will be liked by everyone” (Ep. IV.14.2-3). We are talking about poems written in eleven-syllable meter, known as hendecasyllabus (five-foot meter, consisting of four choreas and one dactyl). In the words of Pliny, “it is advisable too to dabble in poetry, not by composing long continuous

poems — for they can never be finished except one has abundant leisure — but short epigrammatic verse, which gives you an air of distinction, no matter how serious and responsible may be your profession. Verses like these are spoken of as mere interludes, yet they sometimes win a man as much reputation as his serious occupations” (Ep. VII.9.9).

There is a certain paradox: on the one hand, fun and entertainment, on the other hand, a zealous and scrupulous finishing of the text, not to mention the author’s increased attention to criticism, especially from his friends. In this regard, it is impossible not to mention the recitations — public readings, in which Pliny invariably took an active part: he himself read his works aloud with pleasure, and came to listen to the works of other writers, and above all his friends (Ep. VI.17.1; 21.2; VIII.21.2-5; IX.27.1). It is characteristic that he read (sometimes a freedman read for Pliny: Ep. IX.34.1-2) not only his own literary “trinkets”, but also judicial speeches, which was not accepted (Ep. VII.17.2). Usually historical works, tragedies and poems were read during the recitations (ibid. 3). Pliny himself explained his love for recitations in the following way: “Consequently, these are the reasons why I recite in public, first, because a man who recites becomes a keener critic of his own writings out of deference to his audience, and, secondly, because, where he is in doubt, he can decide by referring the point to his listeners” (Ep. V.3.8). Apparently, the perfectionism is inherent in the author manifested itself here. Besides this, Pliny was not indifferent to glory. In one of his letters, as if casually, but obviously not without pride, he informs his addressee: “The reading lasted for two days, this being necessitated by the applause of my audience” (Ep. VIII.21.4). Pliny was flattered by his literary fame (Ep. IX.23.1-6; 25.2). He reread with pleasure what his friends wrote about him (Ep. IX.31.1), and rejoiced that his books were sold even in Lugdunum (Ep. IX.11.2), i.e. in Gaul, not only in Rome and Italy! As M.E. Sergeenko wrote about Pliny the Younger, “he was proud of his magistracy and titles, the glory of a lawyer and writer, authority in wide circles of society. At the same time, he surveyed the surrounding world with an evaluating and critical eye” [5. S. 278–279].

Pliny sent his texts to his friends for reading, receiving their writings in return (Ep. IX.4.1-2; 20.1; 28.3; 35.1-2). He encouraged the literary creativity of his friends in every possible way (Ep. III.15.1-3) and even sometimes gave topics to them (Ep. IX.33.2-10). It must be admitted that Pliny was exceptionally delicate, benevolent, tactful in his reviews of other people’s literary experiments: “For my own part, I make a practice of paying respectful attention to all who do anything at all in literature, and I tender them my admiration. For she is a difficult, arduous, and disdainful mistress, who speedily shows her contempt for those who hold her in slight respect” (Ep. VI.17.5). Note that Pliny exchanged writings with Tacitus, whom he was a friend; they criticized each other, but they did it with the utmost delicacy

(Ep. VII.20.1-2). Pliny praised Tacitus' History (Ep. VII.33.1) and even called himself "a disciple" (*discipulus*) of the great historian (Ep. VIII.7.1). Pliny must have been flattered that as a writer he enjoyed the same fame among his contemporaries as Tacitus (Ep. IX.23.3).

Pliny not only composed poetry and prose, he was also engaged in translations, finding in this great benefit for the development of literature. According to Pliny, "the most useful plan — and many others give the same advice — is to translate from Greek into Latin, or from Latin into Greek. By practising this you acquire fitness and beauty of expression, a good stock of metaphors, and the power of saying what you mean, whilst, by imitating the best models, you fall into the way of finding thoughts similar to theirs. Those points again which may have slipped your memory as you read are retained there as you translate, and you gain thereby in intelligence and judgment" (Ep. VII.9.2). Here Pliny follows a tradition rooted in Roman literature as early as the time of Cicero and Caesar. Ancient authors were indisputable authorities for him (Ep. VI.21.1).

Certainly, Pliny is an excellent stylist, alien to any literary excesses. He has "masterful style and shows virtuosity in its diverse application" [6. S. 169]. According to M. von Albrecht, "the language and style of Pliny's "Letters" delights with its clarity, often brevity" [1. S. 1253]. Pliny's Latin is simple and elegant, the style is expressive. He describes his villas enthusiastically and colorfully, discusses literary themes, freely uses inserted episodes, anecdotes and parables. Pliny the Younger, a disciple of the famous rhetorician Quintilian, he himself was a skilled rhetorician and an expert in dialectics [6. S. 168]. Pliny's interest in philosophy was noted by G. Boissier [2. S. 249]. In our opinion, the most accurate description of this outstanding personality was given by M.E. Sergeenko: "Pliny belonged to the cultural elite of his time, and in many properties of his mind and talent he was above his usual level, but he was neither a philosopher nor a deep thinker. The more interesting this mood of him, these thoughts of him. These were not lonely thoughts; Pliny spoke with like-minded people who responded sympathetically to him. Not intrusive, not moving to the fore, getting lost among many everyday essential topics, but it sounded quite distinctly — isn't it the first time in Roman literature? — disregard for the activities that the world around a person requires, distrust of him was heard. Neither he nor his addressees thought these thoughts through up to the end and did not focus on them, but one and a half to two hundred years will pass, and these thoughts will take possession of human souls, will force many to discard, like unnecessary rags, power, wealth, honor, to flee to the desert, huddle in dead corners, exchange all earthly splendor for a monk's doll, for a cleric's surplice" [5. S. 280–281]. Of course, the significance of the work of Pliny the Younger must be assessed in the context of the historical era in which he happened to live and create.

Conclusion

So, Pliny the Younger, this, if you like, a Roman intellectual, who survived the difficult times of the Domitian's despotic rule, reached the pinnacle of career under the first Antonines, became, by the grace of Trajan, a consul, an augur and an imperial legate. Exactly at that time (96–113), when not only Pliny's abilities as a statesman, but also his bright literary talent and the gift of an orator were fully realized. The collection of letters that have survived up to now and the Panegyric to Emperor Trajan, a brilliant example of the rhetorical skill of our hero, have rightfully entered the golden fund of the ancient cultural heritage. Pliny the Younger — a loyal subject who felt like a citizen (in the modern sense of the word), a large landowner, completely indifferent to his colossal material wealth, an intellectual immersed in literary creativity — is, of course, one of the best representatives of the Roman ruling elite of the 2nd century. We can say that this is the leaving nature; less than a hundred years will pass after his death, and a crisis of the 3rd century will come, which will draw a line under the existence of the Mediterranean ancient culture, created by the efforts of such outstanding people as Pliny the Younger.

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Information about the author:

Nikishin Vladimir Olegovich — candidate of sciences (history), assistant professor, department of ancient history, faculty of history, Moscow State University named after M.V. Lomonosov, e-mail: cicero74@mail.ru. ORCID: 0000-0003-2209-5357