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Inventing Trajan:

The Construction of the Emperor's Image in

Book 10 of Pliny the Younger's *Letters*

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**Inventing Trajan:
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Book 10 of Pliny the Younger's *Letters***

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Pamela and Garrison Turner

because of their unending support and encouragement,
without which my work would not be possible.

Thank you mom and dad. I love you.

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Abigail Turner, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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The Roman Emperor Trajan, who ruled the Roman Empire from 98 CE – 117 CE has always been remembered as one of the good Emperors. The few ancient sources that mention Trajan, namely Pliny the Younger and Cassius Dio, compose a glowing portrait of the Emperor when describing his deeds and abilities. Part of the explanation for such a positive portrayal can surely be accounted for by the comparison of Trajan to one of his predecessors Domitian (who ruled from 51 CE – 96 CE). Domitian came to be memorialized as one of the most hated Emperor of the Principate, especially because of his scornful and suspicious attitude towards the Senate and his pillaging of the Roman provinces for the purpose of his own profit. In a time when the empire was expanding and expert diplomatic and strategic capability was necessary for an Emperor to possess, Domitian's shortcomings were particularly harmful to Rome and her subjects. Thus when Trajan took control, many Romans must have looked to him to continue the

improvements initiated by Domitian's brief successor Nerva and repair the damage done to the empire.

Pliny the younger, an influential and wealthy senatorial aristocrat, was one such Roman who looked to the new Emperor with hope and ambition for better times. During Pliny's tenure as governor of the province of Bithynia and Pontus from roughly 110-112/3 CE, he exchanged many letters with Trajan which were subsequently collected and published as the tenth book of Pliny's *Letters*. These letters generally take the form of advice sought by Pliny about the governance of the province, followed by a concise reply from the Emperor directing Pliny's actions (or, at times, suggesting that Pliny himself choose the best way to proceed). Previous scholarship has primarily addressed the letters as a "self-fashioning text" (cf. Carlos Noreña and Philip Stadter, among others), but generally ignores the very active role Pliny plays in carefully constructing a particular representation of Trajan. Using this correspondence as a platform on which to create an image of the *Princeps*, Pliny expertly invents a particular portrait of Trajan that portrays the Emperor as a master at senatorial relations and management of the provinces. By allowing Trajan to perform this role, as is evidenced in the letters of Book 10, Pliny creates our most complete and compelling portrayal of this Emperor which serves both Pliny and Trajan's interests for posterity.

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Introduction

The Emperor Trajan, who ruled Rome from 98 B.C.E. – 117 C.E., is memorialized by our ancient sources as the *Optimus Princeps*, the second of the “five good Emperors,” and the conqueror of Dacia. His glowing image stood apart in antiquity, just as it does today, from the tyrannical representation of his predecessor Domitian by virtue of his modest conduct in public, his accessibility, his prowess in warfare and his *humanitas*. But perhaps two of the most crucially different aspects of Trajan’s reign that have been handed down to us were his productive relationship with the Senate and his apparently effective and benevolent management of the provinces. The sources emphasize these two characteristics of Trajan’s behavior as the primary features that generate the Emperor’s image as far removed from tyranny. Trajan’s respectful treatment of the Senate is well documented by Pliny the Younger in his *Panegyricus* and by Cassius Dio in book 68 of his *Roman History*.

A range of sources, including Pliny and Dio, highlight Trajan’s relationship with the provinces. Material evidence, including Trajan’s column and numerous provincial coins minted during Trajan’s rule, also contribute to his image as a good provincial administrator.¹ One of the most important sources for our image of Trajan as a benevolent manager of the provinces, however, is Book 10 of Pliny’s *Letters*. Book 10 preserves a series of epistles exchanged between Pliny and the Emperor Trajan around 110-112 C.E. while Pliny was governor of Bithynia and Pontus. This correspondence

¹ See, for example, Davies, Penelope J.E. “The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan’s Column and the Art of Commemoration” in *AJA* Vol. 101, No. 1, pp. 41-65; material evidence will be discussed further in the concluding section of this paper.

illuminates the relationship between the Emperor and one of his high-ranking senators and, in particular, draws attention to the reciprocal nature of that relationship. However, Pliny does not simply record the activities of the *Princeps* in his letters; rather, Pliny plays a critical role in actively constituting the image of Trajan as an Emperor skilled in provincial management. In addition to constructing such a portrayal of the Emperor as being an effective provincial manager, the correspondence serves as a reminder to Trajan (and other readers, including later emperors) why it can be advantageous for Emperors to cultivate solid, mutually beneficial relationships with the senatorial aristocracy.

This thesis will examine the letters in Book 10 of the *Epistles* within the framework of Pliny's so-called invention of Trajan, with special attention to the construction of a portrait of the Emperor as both a *civilis Princeps* who deferred to the Senate when necessary and as an adept and thoughtful manager of the provinces. Following an overview of Trajan's reputation as the *Optimus Princeps*, I will discuss the relationship between Rome and the provinces during the empire before Trajan: how it evolved and developed, and how it often proved difficult to handle. I will then offer an overview of the scholarly consensus regarding Trajan's provincial management, noting that such a view was effectively constructed by Pliny in Book 10. Next the paper will explore the nature of Book 10, its relationship to Books 1-9, and the scholarship that reflects the growing consensus that Book 10 is not a direct reflection of reality but a self-fashioning text. C. Noreña and P.A. Stadter's approaches to the relationship between Pliny, Trajan and the letters of Book 10 will be considered especially carefully. After contextualizing the arguments of this paper within the current scholarship, I will discuss

how the genre of letters are particularly appropriate for offering Trajan the opportunity to perform the role of the *Optimus Princeps*. I will give special attention to the issue of the publication of Book 10 and the question of the audience for such published correspondence and then will review the textual sources (and lack thereof) for Trajan's reign and discuss the implications of the fact that there is a dearth of material from Trajan's contemporaries (with the exception, of course, of Pliny).

In the concluding section of the paper, I will review various types of material evidence, particularly Trajan's column and provincial coinage, that might enhance our textual evidence regarding Trajan's attitude towards and relationship with the provinces. I will suggest that this material evidence reinforces and fleshes out the image of Trajan constructed by Pliny, albeit using different strategies of commemoration. Through this analysis of Book 10 and its impact in the creation of Trajan's received image, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that Pliny actively invented our current perception of the Emperor Trajan as a *civilis Princeps*, indeed the *Optimus Princeps*, who was a master at administering the provinces.

Trajan: *Optimus Princeps*

*Omnia, patres conscripti, quae de aliis Principibus a me aut dicuntur aut dicta sunt, eo pertinent ut ostendam, quam longa consuetudine corruptos depravatosque mores principatus parens noster reformet et corrigat. Alioqui nihil non parum grate sine comparatione laudatur. Praeterea hoc primum erga optimum imperatorem piorem civium officium est, insequi dissimiles; neque enim satis amarit bonos principes, qui malos satis non oderit.*²

Everything that is said or has been said by me concerning previous rulers, Conscript Fathers, pertains to this so that I might show how our father restores and reforms the character of the principate which was long accustomed to being corrupted and depraved. Besides, nothing is praised agreeably without comparison. Moreover, this deed is the first duty of loyal citizen on behalf of the best Emperor, to attack those unlike [him]; for it is not enough that he love the good rulers if he does not have enough hatred for those who are bad.³

Throughout his *Panegyricus* in praise of the Emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger draws frequent comparisons between Trajan and his hated predecessor Domitian. Such comparisons are generally intended to demonstrate the virtues and good qualities of Trajan in direct opposition to the depraved behavior of the tyrannical Domitian. When analyzed side by side in this way, the faults of Domitian do indeed appear all the more degenerate while the concept of a Trajanic new beginning shines through all the more brightly.⁴ In addition to comparing the two Emperors, Pliny pays tribute to Trajan in his own right: *Divinitatem Principis nostri, an humanitatem temperantiam facilitatem, ut amor et gaudium tulit, celebrare universi solemus?*⁵ (Is it the *divinitas* of our prince or his *humanitas*, his moderation and his courtesy which joy and affection prompt us to celebrate in a single voice?) In this passage Pliny debates which of these two important

² Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus* 53.1-3.

³ All translations of Pliny's works in this report, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

⁴ One example out of many: "How wonderful it was of you to rekindle the dying flame of military discipline by destroying the indifference, insolence and contempt for obedience, those evils of the preceding regime!" (*Pan.* 18.1) Pliny does not mention Domitian by name, but the reference is clear.

⁵ *Pan.* 2.7.

qualities possessed by Trajan cultivate the most favor and love from his subjects. As a senator and one such subject, Pliny claims that nothing brings the Emperor greater glory than the fact that his citizens, in praising him, have nothing to hide (*Quare non alia maior, imperator auguste, Gloria tua quam quod agentibus tibi gratias nihil velandum est, nihil omittendum [est]*).⁶ In Trajan's case, as Pliny appears to highlight, an Emperor can be equally loved and honored by the people and respected by the Senate.

Despite these glorious commendations of Trajan's own character, Pliny's praise is indeed especially effective and particularly hits home when juxtaposed to criticism of the terrible deeds and pernicious policies of Domitian. Pliny exhorts his listeners (and readers) to forget their fear and the sufferings of the past to embrace this new and more liberal age:

*Discernatur orationibus nostris diversitas temporum, et ex ipso genere gratiarum agendarum intellegatur, cui quando sint actae. Nusquam ut deo, nusquam ut numini blandiamur: non enim de tyranno sed de cive, non de domino sed de parente loquimur.*⁷

Times are different, and our speeches much show this; from the very nature of our thanks both the recipient and the occasion must be made clear to all. Nowhere should we flatter him as a divinity and a god; we are talking of a fellow citizen, not a tyrant, one who is our father and not our master.

The reference to Domitian's desire to be referred to as *dominus et deus* is clear: instead of remaining the first among equals, the *Princeps*, Domitian insisted that he be addressed as the master of the people and their god.⁸ This must have been particularly offensive to the sensibilities of free Roman citizens who valued their free status and only elevated certain

⁶ *Pan.* 56.1.

⁷ *Pan.* 2.3.

⁸ See, for example, Dio 67.4.7.

Emperors to the level of the gods after their death (and only then if they were a good Emperor). The term *dominus* was generally used to describe a master in relation to his slaves, thus implying a vast difference in both status and honor, as well as connoting, in the case of Domitian, a dominant/servile relationship between Emperor and subject.⁹ This form of address or title, *dominus et deus*, became a troped way of casting a ruler as a tyrant. Pliny is thus declaring that Trajan shall never be viewed as such an oppressor. Perhaps Pliny felt the need to prescribe in this way because Trajan was, at the beginning of his reign, more similar to a tyrant than a *Princeps*. In fact, he was effectively placed in power by the senatorial elite who forced Nerva to adopt him. Thus, by insisting that Trajan is the opposite of a tyrant (and in fact subtly reminding the Emperor that he must distinguish himself from Domitian), Pliny appears to be attempting to draw attention away from the initial circumstances of Trajan's accession.

In addition to his titulature, Trajan's mode of travel through the provinces is also contrasted with Domitian's plundering ways. Domitian's advance was so violent that the people had to be persuaded that it was only this Emperor who traveled in such a fashion (*Persuadendum provinciis erat illud iter Domitiani fuisse, non Principis*).¹⁰ Trajan, on the other hand, proceeded peacefully and without trouble, acquiring supplies as he needed them.¹¹ This respectful treatment of the people in the provinces was characteristic of Trajan's reign and will be discussed further below. A similar yet much more subtle

⁹ For a discussion on the use of the term *dominus* in Latin literature, and in the *Panegyricus* in particular, see Noreña (2007), especially pp. 247-250. Noreña also considers, however, the nuanced use of the term by Pliny to refer to Trajan and the different meanings it can possess (for example, when applied in public contexts it was offensive, but when used in private contexts it can signify respect and affection).

¹⁰ *Pan.* 20.4.

¹¹ *Pan.* 20.5.

tendency to compare can also be observed in Cassius Dio's depictions of Domitian and Trajan: Book 68, which is dedicated primarily to describing the deeds of Trajan, includes numerous references to Domitian's bad character by way of discussing Trajan's good one.¹²

Perhaps two of the most important distinctions between Domitian's and Trajan's reigns enumerated by Pliny in the *Panegyricus* are Trajan's relationship with the Senate and his approach to dealing with the provinces. These aspects of an Emperor's reign were so consequential because, for example, an Emperor who shunned the advice of the Senate and terrorized its members was viewed as a tyrannical dictator, not a representative of the interests of all. Likewise, an Emperor who abused Rome's provinces by pillaging them for resources and wealth not only damaged the vital system of supply that sustained the capital, but violated the trust and loyalty given by the people in the provinces to Rome. Therefore, in order to be viewed as a good Emperor, it was important for Trajan to be portrayed as being friendly with the Senate and benevolent towards the provinces. We can assume, therefore, that Pliny was attempting both to contrast these positive qualities of Trajan in particular with Domitian's failure in these areas, at the same time as informing Trajan of how to behave in the future.

The importance of an Emperor's relationship with the Senate should require little explanation. Due to the often complex nature of such a rapport, however, it merits some

¹² For example, "He [Trajan] didn't envy nor slay any one, but honoured and exalted all good men without exception, and hence he neither feared nor hated any one of them. To slanders he paid very little heed and he was no slave of anger. He refrained equally from the money of others and from unjust murders." Dio 68.6.4.

discussion here.¹³ There were shifts of power between the *Princeps* and the Senate during the early years of the Principate as both sorted out their new authoritative roles. It became important for the Emperor to allow the Senate to maintain the appearance of control and decision-making, even if this was not the case in reality. Wallace-Hadrill describes this balance as an “elaborate and yet transparent façade: the Senate decrees, the Princeps submits to the will of the citizen body.”¹⁴ By deferring to the Senate and involving it in his decision-making, the Emperor maintained the illusion of a cooperative relationship while at the same time actually reinforcing his own power.

Certain Emperors dealt with such subtle political maneuvering more deftly than others. Augustus was a master at such negotiation, as is evident in his first and second settlements with the Senate (in 27 and 23 BCE respectively). In the first settlement, he made a great display of returning full power to the Senate after Julius Caesar and the wars with Antony had compromised the Senate’s influence.¹⁵ In the second settlement the Emperor relinquished his position as consul for life, thus allowing the position to be filled by a senator in his place.¹⁶ In general, however, the period of the Julio-Claudians was often marked by strife between the Senate and the *Princeps* because many of the old senators still hoped to see the Republic restored.¹⁷

While Nero promised to restore the full Republican period powers to the Senate in 54 CE upon his rise to power, his own authority gradually increased as he removed

¹³ Trajan’s relationship with the Senate as seen in Pliny’s *Letters* and *Panegyricus* will be further discussed below.

¹⁴ Wallace-Hadrill 32.

¹⁵ Eck 45.

¹⁶ Eck 57.

¹⁷ Millar (1967) 43.

government officials from their posts and arrested numerous others for extortion and corruption.¹⁸ By 65 CE the Senate was almost devoid of any power or influence, leading to the Pisonian conspiracy.¹⁹ Vespasian, on the other hand, was apparently able to restore an “easy and unceremonious” relationship with the senators, probably in response to Nero, through his construction of a straightforward character.

Domitian, however, caused any goodwill to vanish, partly due to his persecutions of various senators between 93-96 C.E.²⁰ One of Domitian’s most serious problems resulted from the fact that he, like Nero, did not properly cultivate a positive relationship with the senatorial aristocracy. While Domitian was popular with the people, he was scorned by the Senate and thus gained none of its support. Because of this tension, Trajan inherited a Senate which was accustomed to being mistrusted and badly mistreated.

Pliny is quick to claim (in the *Panegyricus*) how dramatically the relationship between Emperor and Senate improved after Trajan’s accession. The senator accomplishes this mainly through his portrayal of Trajan as a *civilis Princeps* rather than a military dictator who seized power.²¹ We can also hypothesize that part of Pliny’s mission in the *Panegyricus* is to remind Trajan the importance of maintaining good relations with the Senate (precisely the opposite of how Domitian handled things). This important distinction from Domitian, as has been discussed above, is particularly articulated in the *Panegyricus* in Pliny’s discussion of Trajan’s respect for the Senate. In section 54.3, Pliny describes how previously, if anyone in the Senate wished to speak

¹⁸ Tacitus *Annales*, XVI.46.

¹⁹ Tacitus *Annales* XV.51.

²⁰ Millar (1967) 44.

²¹ See, for example, *Pan.* 9.5, 16.1; it is important to note, however, that Trajan was, in effect, a usurper: Nerva was forced by the Senate to adopt him after the Praetorian Guard revolted.

concerning an issue, he had to draw out his speech with flattery of the Emperor; under Trajan, however, the purpose of the Senate was to practice and render justice, not to compete in flattery.²²

In fact, Pliny was so impressed by the Senate in Trajan's time that he states that he believed he was part of the great Senate of past times (presumably in the Republic). In the more recent past, however, the relationship between the Emperor and the Senate had become so degenerate that the Senate's support of a man would act as his condemnation. Domitian, for instance, hated everyone whom the Senate loved. But Trajan and the Senate instead compete in their support of all the same good men, and the senators are free to speak openly for or against whomever they please. In the end, Pliny asserts that Trajan honored the Senate by preferring its choices.²³

Pliny also describes the spirit of freedom that pervaded the Senate house under Trajan when the Emperor exhorted all senators to resume their accustomed responsibilities of watching over the interests of the people and to speak freely without fear.²⁴ The Senate demonstrated their reciprocal trust of the *Princeps* by telling him "Trust us, trust yourself," thus confirming the changed dynamic between the two entities of Emperor and Senate. But perhaps the clearest indication of the Senate's respect for their new Emperor, as reported by Pliny, is the awarding of the title *Optimus* to Trajan's name – because he was the best of everyone who possessed many virtues.²⁵

²² *Pan.* 55.5.

²³ *Pan.* 62.2-6.

²⁴ *Pan.* 66.2-4.

²⁵ *Pan.* 88.4-7.

The *Panegyricus* does not simply describe the good deeds and policies of the Emperor. Indeed, Pliny delivered the speech at the beginning of Trajan's reign, at a point in time when Trajan had not accomplished very much. In fact, the *Panegyricus* takes on a more prescriptive function to encourage Trajan to mend and strengthen the relationship between Senate and *princeps*. Pliny references previous Emperor (namely Domitian) who have damaged that important relationship, thus calling attention to the necessity of Trajan's reparative actions. Pliny emphasizes that, from the beginning, Trajan has already proven himself to be different from and thus superior to Domitian in his treatment of the senators, but Pliny also seems to remind the Emperor that his work is not done. Especially since the rapport between the *princeps* and the Senate was particularly tense at the time of Trajan's succession, Pliny's advice to the new Emperor was all the more poignant and relevant. The empire was expanding, the demands of governing such a vast territory were considerable, and a healthy relationship with the Senate was crucial for the Emperor so that he would have all the support at home he needed so that he could focus substantial attention abroad.

The Emperor and The Provinces

The other primary area of concern for Pliny (and probably for many of his contemporary Romans) was Trajan's relationship with and management of the provinces. During the reigns of previous Emperor, this sometimes troubled rapport might be compared to the interactions between the city of Rome and the rest of Italy earlier in the Republic, at a time when the power of Rome was expanding rapidly and tensions were rising between that ever more powerful city and her neighbors to the north and south. Just as it was important for Rome to both overcome and subdue the tribes throughout Italy in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E., it was even more imperative that, as a growing empire, she subjugate the sometimes fertile but often troublesome territories under her rule around the Mediterranean. Not only did Rome conquer those peoples with whom she came in contact as she expanded outward from Italy, but she needed to maintain collegial relationships with them. Such areas as Egypt, for instance, provided a significant portion of Rome's grain supply, among other goods. It was helpful for Emperors and their administrators to cultivate the loyalty of their provincials and garner their countries' riches while appearing not to exploit or plunder their resources overmuch.²⁶

This delicate balance calls attention to the two broad aspects of an Emperor's relationship with the provinces: the conquest, often involving war, of the territory and its addition to the Roman Empire; and the subsequent administration of the province. In question was the issue of how the Emperor, often through his provincial governors, took care of business throughout the vast empire he oversaw. The process of conquering

²⁶ See discussion of Nero after the Great Fire of 64 C.E. below.

territory and incorporating a new group of people into the empire was an often lengthy and bloody operation that required an Emperor to be both a charismatic general and skilled diplomat.

Throughout the last century B.C.E. and the first century C.E. the empire rapidly expanded. It reached its greatest territorial extent, in fact, under Trajan in the early second century C.E. Many rulers and Emperors embarked upon campaigns to subdue Rome's neighbors, and it was not until the end of Augustus' reign (with the disaster in the Teutoberg forest in 9 C.E. known as the *clades Varriana*) that the relatively unflagging expansion was checked. Augustus thereafter admonished his successors to keep the empire within its current bounds. Tiberius followed his advice.²⁷ Occasionally, however, insecure Emperors such as Caligula felt the need to rally the support of the public with (at times) poorly planned or executed campaigns. Other Emperors, such as Claudius, followed their ambitions and did indeed add more territory to the Empire.²⁸

Other Emperors, such as Nero, were not only insecure but, it seems, not particularly skilled in provincial management. While it is not clear that Nero possessed any great ambitions to expand the empire or conduct large-scale military campaigns, he nevertheless became involved in various conflicts, such as the quelling of a revolt of the Jews and growing rebellion in Britain and Gaul.²⁹ His treatment of the provinces after the Great Fire in Rome elicited comment from both Tacitus and Suetonius. After Rome

²⁷ Williams 10.

²⁸ Caligula invaded Britain unsuccessfully (he halted at Bologne); Claudius' attempt was more successful and Britain was made a province in 43 C.E. (Williams 10)

²⁹ See Dio 63.22.

burned (some say at Nero's instigation),³⁰ Nero wished to gain back the people's favor by rebuilding much of the city from private funds. In order to accomplish this, however, he "not only received, but exacted contributions on account of the loss, until he had exhausted the means both of the provinces and private persons (*conlationibusque non receptis modo verum et efflagitatis provincias privatorumque census prope exhaustit*)."³¹ Dio also comments on Nero's rapacious provincial management regarding the treatment of Gaul through a speech of the Gallic leader Vindex:

οὗτος ὁ Οὐίνδιξ συναθροίσας τοὺς
Γαλάτας πολλὰ πεπονθότας
τε ἐν ταῖς συχναῖς ἐσπράξεσι τῶν χρημάτων καὶ ἔτι πάσχοντας ὑπὸ
Νέρωνος, καὶ ἀναβὰς ἐπὶ βῆμα
μακρὰν διεξῆλθε κατὰ τοῦ Νέρω-
νος ῥῆσιν λέγων δεῖν ἀποστήναί τε
αὐτοῦ καὶ ἅμα οἱ ἐπιστήναι αὐτῷ,
"ὅτι" φησὶ "πᾶσαν τὴν τῶν Ῥωμαίων οἰκουμένην σεσύληκεν, ὅτι
πάν τὸ ἄνθος τῆς βουλῆς αὐτῶν ἀπολώλεκεν, ὅτι τὴν μητέρα τὴν
ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἥσχυνε καὶ ἀπέκτεινε, καὶ οὐδ' αὐτὸ τὸ σχῆμα τῆς
ἡγεμονίας σώζει. σφαγαὶ μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἀρπαγαὶ καὶ ὕβρεις καὶ ὑπ' ἄλλων
πολλὰι πολλάκις ἐγένοντο· τὰ δὲ δὴ λοιπὰ πῶς ἂν τις κατ' ἀξίαν εἰπεῖν δ
υνηθείη;"³²

This Vindex called together the Gauls, who had suffered much by the numerous forced levies of money and were still suffering at Nero's hands. And ascending a tribunal he delivered a long and detailed speech against Nero, saying that they ought to revolt from the Emperor and join the speaker in an attack upon him, "because," as he said, "he has despoiled the whole Roman world, because he has destroyed all the flower of the Senate, because he debauched and then killed his mother, and does not preserve even the semblance of sovereignty. Many murders, robberies and outrages, it is true, have often been committed by others; but as for the other deeds committed by Nero, how could one find words fittingly to

³⁰ Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44) and Suetonius (*Nero* 37) both mention similar rumors.

³¹ Suetonius *Nero* 8.38.3; Tacitus makes a similar and even more striking comment (*Ann.* 15.45):

"Meanwhile Italy was thoroughly exhausted by contributions of money, the provinces were ruined, as also the allied nations and the free states, as they were called. Even the gods fell victims to the plunder; for the temples in Rome were despoiled and the gold carried off, which, for a triumph or a vow, the Roman people in every age had consecrated in their prosperity or their alarm." (Trans. Loeb)

³² Cassius Dio *Historiae Romanae* 63.22.2-4.

describe them?”³³

In this passage, Dio criticizes Nero’s treatment of the provinces (the Gauls had suffered because of his levies) and states that the Emperor plundered the whole Roman world. Instead of taking care of the provinces and establishing a relationship of trust and mutual benefaction, Nero uses them to enrich himself and satisfy his own greed (according to Vindex). Such comments clearly speak to current concerns about the relationship between Rome and the provinces, and it becomes evident that Nero’s abuse of the provinces is a characteristic of his more generally abusive character. He mistreated the provinces in the same way he mistreated Rome’s citizens and mores. It is not a coincidence that the historians writing of Nero’s reign, notably Tacitus and Suetonius, were writing in the time of Trajan; they thus highlight Trajan’s appropriate interaction with the provinces through such historical commentary.

Following Nero’s death in 68 and the chaos of 69, Vespasian took office and immediately set out to distinguish himself from Nero’s example. Suetonius describes the chaotic and troubled state of affairs upon Vespasian’s assumption of power:

*Milites pars victoriae fiducia, pars ignominiae dolore ad omnem licentiam audaciamque processerant; sed et provinciae civitatesque liberae, nec non et regna quaedam tumultuosius inter se agebant. Quare Vitellianorum quidem et exauctoravit plurimos et coercuit, participibus autem victoriae adeo nihil extra ordinem indulxit, ut etiam legitima praemia sero persolverit.*³⁴

The soldiery, some emboldened by their victory and some resenting their humiliating defeat, had abandoned themselves to every form of licence and recklessness; the provinces, too, and the free cities, as well as some of the

³³ Trans. Loeb.

³⁴ Suetonius *The Divine Vespasian* 8.8.1-2.

kingdoms, were in a state of internal dissension. Therefore he discharged many of the soldiers of Vitellius and punished many; but so far from showing any special indulgence to those who had shared in his victory, he was even tardy in paying them their lawful rewards.³⁵

The troops were in disarray and lacked discipline and the provinces themselves were in a state of internal turmoil. Vespasian's response was to revamp the discipline of the army and bring a number of territories at the edges of the empire under Rome's control, specifically Achaia, Lycia, Rhodes, Byzantium, Samos, Trachian Cilicia and Commagene (as reported by Suetonius).³⁶ In addition to bringing the provinces to heel, the new Emperor also reformed the senatorial and equestrian orders which had been reduced due to numerous murders and had atrophied after a long period of neglect (*Amplissimos ordines et exhaustos caede varia et contaminatos veteri neglegentia, purgavit supplevitque recenso senatu et equite*).³⁷ This attention to the protective force of the empire and the aristocratic orders addressed the neglect and abuse inflicted upon institutions of all kind under Nero. It likewise reflected Vespasian's apparent desire to separate himself as much as possible from his predecessor.³⁸ Vespasian's later efforts at provincial management concentrated primarily on consolidating the frontiers, especially those in the east, by building and repairing roads and forts along the *limes*.³⁹

While Domitian's "foreign policy" was perhaps not as blatantly contrary to the

³⁵ Trans. Loeb.

³⁶ Suet. *Vesp.* 8.8.2-4; all these territories were made into provinces.

³⁷ Suet. *Vesp.* 8.9.2.

³⁸ Vespasian did, however, destroy the great temple in Jerusalem in the brutal Jewish Wars, recorded by Josephus, which lasted from 66-71 CE. Vespasian, before he was Emperor, was also sent by Nero to deal with the revolt that had broken out in Judea. Vespasian also opened the *Domus Aurea* to the public, rededicated the colossus of Nero to the Sun god, and used the grounds of Nero's lake to build an amphitheater.

³⁹ Williams 23.

interests of the provinces as was Nero's, his attempted campaigns in Germany and Dacia were less than successful and in fact quite harmful. He withdrew troops from Britain to fight the Chattans in Germany, an offensive described as a "propaganda flop" by Williams.⁴⁰ Suetonius asserts that Domitian's expeditions into Gaul and Germany were unnecessary and contrary to the advice of all his father's friends; he merely desired to equal his brother in military achievements and glory.⁴¹ Dio reports that Domitian plundered tribes in Gaul who possessed treaty rights, and after raising the soldiers' pay perhaps because of this alleged victory proceeded to reduce the number of troops due to the greater expense of maintaining them:

καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα εἰς Γαλατίαν ἐξορμήσας, καὶ λεηλατήσας τινὰ τῶν πέραν Ῥήνου τῶν ἐνσπόνδων, ὡγκοῦτο ὥς τι μέγα κατωρθώκως, καὶ τοῖς στρατιώταις ἐπηύξησε τὴν μισθοφορὰν, τάχα διὰ τὴν νίκην· πέντε γὰρ καὶ ἑβδομήκοντα δραχμὰς ἑκάστου λαμβάνοντος ἑκατὸν ἐκέλευσε δίδοσθαι. μεταμεληθεὶς δὲ τὴν μὲν ποσότητα οὐκ ἐμείωσε, τὸ δὲ πλῆθος τῶν στρατευομένων συνέστειλε. καὶ ἑκατέρωθεν μεγάλα τὸ δημόσιον ἔβλαψε, μὴθ' ἱκανοὺς τοὺς ἀμύνοντας αὐτῷ καὶ τούτους μεγαλομίσθους ποιήσας.⁴²

After this he set out for Gaul and plundered some of the tribes beyond the Rhine that enjoyed treaty rights — a performance which filled him with conceit as if he had achieved some great success; and he increased the soldiers' pay, perhaps on account of this victory, commanding that four hundred sesterces should be given to each man in place of the three hundred that he had been receiving. Later he thought better of it, but, instead of diminishing the amount of their pay, he reduced the number of soldiers. Both changes entailed great injury to the State; for he made its defenders too few in number and yet at the same time very expensive to maintain.⁴³

Such actions were dangerous and injured the state because there were then too few troops

⁴⁰ Williams 42.

⁴¹ Suet. *Domitian* 2.

⁴² Dio *Domitian* 67.3.5

⁴³ Trans. Loeb.

and they were still too expensive to maintain. Instead of protecting the provinces and maintaining order in a disciplined yet benevolent manner, Domitian violated treaties and jeopardized the effectiveness of the army.

Likewise, when Domitian set out to campaign in Germany, he reportedly did not engage in any fighting, but nevertheless claimed excessive honors as if he had won a great victory. The people were obliged to honor the Emperor so that he would not realize that they saw through him and become angry as a result.⁴⁴ Additionally, his encounters with the Dacian chief Decebalus demonstrate his inability to balance diplomatic and militaristic action. When he first decided to attack them he did not take an active role in the fighting but instead stayed in a city in Moesia, “indulging in riotous living, as he was wont. For he was not only indolent of body and timorous of spirit, but also most profligate and lewd towards women and boys alike. He therefore sent others to conduct the war and for the most part got the worst of it.”⁴⁵ Domitian lacked the self-control and discipline to act as a role model for the empire’s troops or, for that matter, for its citizens. His extravagant and riotous manner of living contrasted sharply with previous Emperors such as Vespasian or Augustus. He could claim none of their modesty or piety. His conduct during war reflected the same vices, and, as Dio informs us, he failed to take responsibility for the administration of the war with the Dacians. Thereafter, having been defeated by the Marcomani, Domitian was forced to make a truce with Decebalus and pay him great sums of money. However, the Emperor celebrated as if he had won a great victory despite the actual lack of spoils. To pay for this extravagance, Domitian had to

⁴⁴ Dio *Domitian* 67.4.1-2.

⁴⁵ Dio *Domitian* 67.6.3; translation Loeb.

raid the stores of imperial furniture and, as Dio claims, “he had enslaved even the empire itself.”⁴⁶

While it was important for an Emperor to be a *civilis princeps* and manage affairs at home, in Rome, with the Senate (which, additionally, Domitian failed to do), it was at times equally as important that he be a formidable military commander. By failing to perform this role properly, Domitian injured the empire and lost favor with the Senate and the people.⁴⁷ Such mismanagement of the provinces, and indeed general mismanagement of his *maius imperium*, appears to have been characteristic of Domitian’s reign. However, it is important to keep in mind the nature of our sources for Domitian’s deeds. They are all fairly rather against him and, for this reason, we are presented with an almost wholly negative image of the Emperor. Because of this, it is difficult to discern fact from outright fiction or exaggeration, and indeed we may never know the difference. What is significant is that these sources frame his incompetence in the context of his failure at managing provincial affairs and relations. He either performs poorly in times of war or takes advantage of the provinces in times of peace – equally unacceptable forms of abusive behavior towards Rome’s subjects. Especially when contrasted with the image of Trajan and his model behavior concerning the provinces, Domitian’s floundering appears all the more harmful.

Trajan’s strategies of provincial management have been discussed by scholars such as Ando, Stadter, Noreña and Woolf (among others), but all generally take the

⁴⁶ Dio *Domitian* 67.7.2-4; Domitian also granted honors and distributed money to the soldiers.

⁴⁷ As is evidenced in the writings of Dio and Suetonius (see, for example, Dio *Dom.* 67.7-8 and Suet. *Dom.* 67.6,10,12.

approach of discussing what Trajan did, not what Pliny reported that the Emperor did. These scholars' goals may have been to demonstrate Trajan's good provincial management through an analysis of his reported deeds, but this paper analyzes Pliny's portrayal of Trajan for a particular purpose and in a particular context. Specifically, in a time when competent provincial management is so crucial, Pliny aims to create an image of Trajan as the Emperor who is the best at dealing with his subjects and their resources. While Ando, for example, discusses the ways in which Trajan encouraged the development of a "culture of loyalism" (by allowing the provincials to build monuments in his name), he fails to consider why these events were important for Pliny to relate.⁴⁸

Stadter thoroughly treats the relationship between Emperor and senator as seen in Pliny's *Letters*, but once again tackles the subject primarily from Trajan's point of view.⁴⁹ He concludes that the working relationship between Pliny and Trajan was crucial to the smooth functioning of provincial management, but Pliny's role in the construction of Trajan's image is not considered. Stadter almost touches upon the issue when discussing how Pliny presents their administration of the empire as just through their correspondence, but does not pursue the issue.⁵⁰ Noreña likewise discusses the cooperative relationship between Pliny and Trajan and the effect it has on their provincial administration but focuses primarily on the nature of that relationship and the benefits derived by each man.⁵¹ Woolf takes a slightly different approach and considers the reasons for Pliny's relatively peaceful tenure in Bithynia and Pontus and what was really

⁴⁸ Ando 308.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Stadter 71-73.

⁵⁰ Stadter 74.

⁵¹ See, for example, Noreña 252-254.

going on behind the curtain of Pliny's words in the *Letters*. He also discusses the ideology of the Roman government as portrayed in Pliny's *Letters* and the "beguiling and reassuring view" it offered of Trajan's role.⁵² He focuses on Pliny's carefully crafted idealism, Trajan's "enlightened" partnership with the Senate, and Pliny's ability to get things done in the province.⁵³ However, the deeds of both Pliny and Trajan are the focus of his discussion rather than how Pliny is constructing a portrait of the Emperor.

Despite their different methodologies and aims, all of these scholars seem to agree that Trajan managed the provinces effectively (and in large part through his cooperation with Pliny, a member of the senatorial aristocracy). The Emperor, unlike his predecessor, treated the provinces with respect and took advantage of the knowledge and abilities of his provincial governor (Pliny) to get things done in the province of Bithynia and Pontus. This positive view of Trajan's successful administration of the provinces was in fact carefully constructed by Pliny in Book 10. The dynamics of this complex process will be explored in the following section.

⁵² Woolf 104.

⁵³ Woolf 105.

Book 10 of Pliny's *Letters*

Book 10 of Pliny's *Letters* is comprised of 124 letters between Pliny and the Emperor Trajan before and during Pliny's tenure as governor of the province of Bithynia and Pontus.⁵⁴ The first fourteen letters were written before Pliny was appointed governor, and the fifteenth letter describes Pliny's journey to his province. The remainder of the collection treats all manner of subjects from recommendations to questions regarding the governance of the province to the reaffirmation of the vows of loyalty taken by the provincials. As we have it, correspondences were always initiated by Pliny but not every one of his letters received a reply (or if it did, not all responses were included in the collection). The letters are arranged so that each reply of Trajan follows the appropriate letter of Pliny, producing the impression of a coherent textual conversation on a large range of issues between the senator and the Emperor. Highlighted here is one of the primary differences between Book 10 and Books 1-9 of Pliny's letters: Book 10 is composed of epistles between Pliny and a single addressee, whereas the letters in Books 1-9 are addressed to a large number of recipients (and these recipients are not organized by addressee). In this regard, Book 10 is more similar to the Ciceronian or Senecan letters, both of which circulated as collections organized by addressee.⁵⁵ Pliny's style in Book 10 is also fairly distinctive from that of the first nine books, partly because, as Stadter argues, he is not the "cultivated litterateur" addressing high-ranking members of

⁵⁴ Probably between 110-112 C.E.

⁵⁵ Cf. John Nicholson's study of the circulation of Cicero's letters.

the elite concerning lofty literary topics. Instead Pliny is playing the role of the “hard-working administrator, assisting the equally indefatigable *Princeps*.”⁵⁶

While these two groups of letters – Books 1-9 and Book 10 – appear to be quite different, there are also important similarities. Woolf argues that both function as vehicles of self-representation for Pliny and Trajan and that both Books 1-9 and Book 10 utilize the language of patronage.⁵⁷ Additionally, Pliny’s letters with Trajan must possess a certain high aesthetic quality that represents (both Pliny and) the Emperor properly, in the same way that we might argue that Books 1-9 must be of a certain quality to represent Pliny appropriately to his peers. Similarly, while scholars argue that Book 10 might be read as an instruction manual for future Emperor, perhaps a number of Pliny’s letters in Books 1-9 should be viewed as advisory documents for the young elite of Rome who hope to follow in Pliny’s footsteps. Regardless of how similar or dissimilar Books 1-9 and Book 10 might seem, it is important to consider whether Pliny intended all the books to circulate together as a set of ten books or whether Book 10 was a separate publication. If Pliny wished all the letters to be bound and published together, then the collections must have more in common than some scholars believe; or they must at least be intended for the same audience, which likely would have affected which letters Pliny (or the editor, if it was a different person) chose to represent himself and Trajan.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Stadter 67.

⁵⁷ Woolf 97.

⁵⁸ The question of an editor of Book 10 will be discussed in the following section on publication.

The Publication of Book 10

Relatively few people probably would have been aware of Trajan's dedication to and benevolent attitude toward the provinces had the letters of Book 10 not been published, as it is this aspect of Trajan's behavior which Book 10 truly celebrates.⁵⁹ A debate has long been raging about who actually published and/or edited Book 10, as well as whether Pliny originally intended his letters with the Emperor to be published at all. Two of the most influential contributions to the debate concerning the issue of publication are those of Carlos Noreña and P.A. Stadter. These scholars' views represent the growing consensus that Book 10 is not necessarily a reflection of reality but a self-fashioning text. The question remains, however, of what is actually being fashioned. Both Noreña and Stadter argue that the letters of Book 10 deliberately construct certain images of Pliny and the Emperor through the portrayal of cooperative interaction and a friendly working relationship – and, most importantly, through the publication of the letter collection.⁶⁰

Noreña begins his study of Book 10 by discussing the advantages of friendship with an Emperor for a senator like Pliny, and in turn the benefits for Trajan as a *civilis princeps* of cultivating a relationship with a high-ranking senator. By incorporating evidence of such a relationship in a body of correspondence that was eventually shared with the public, it can be argued that Pliny reinforces his elevated status and fashions one

⁵⁹ Pliny's *Panegyricus* was indeed in circulation from the beginning of Trajan's reign, but that document could not have included such information and specificity as Pliny's tenth book of letters, composed much later while Pliny was actually in Bithynia and Pontus (with the exception of the first 14 letters).

⁶⁰ Noreña's discussion of the publication of book ten can be found in his 2007 article "The Social Economy of Pliny's Correspondence with Trajan" in *The American Journal of Philology* 128, 239-277, and Stadter's discussion in his 2006 article "Pliny and the Ideology of Empire: The Correspondence with Trajan" in *Prometheus* 32, 61-76.

aspect of Trajan's character as well. Of course, this mutual self-fashioning would only prove advantageous if the letters were read by Pliny's aristocratic peers and Trajan's subjects (among potential other groups⁶¹), thus leading Noreña to conclude that Pliny himself intended to publish the letters from the beginning and that they were indeed published in his lifetime.⁶² In order to more fully persuade his readers of these slightly tenuous assertions, Noreña suggests other possible candidates for overseeing the publication of Book 10.⁶³ Other scholars (like Stadter, discussed below) prefer not to rule out Pliny himself as the editor and publisher of his tenth book of letters. Noreña rightly points out, however, that, if Pliny's letters were published posthumously, we can never know who published them.

Ultimately, Noreña believes that Pliny did intend Book 10 for publication because it continues to engage in the same purpose of self-fashioning as Books 1-9 and it in fact makes sense to group the letters and responses from one correspondent together.⁶⁴ While this is an admittedly circular argument, Noreña certainly makes a compelling case for reading Book 10 as more similar to Books 1-9 than previously thought. Furthermore, through the process of fashioning a profitable portrait of the Emperor, Pliny himself is elevated and appears respectable. He would likely wish to circulate such correspondence

⁶¹ The question of audience will be discussed more fully below.

⁶² Noreña 261-2. He acknowledges, however, that his view can only be supported by circumstantial evidence, and that there is no external evidence for the publication of book ten.

⁶³ Possible candidates include: (1) Voconius Rufus, an equestrian friend of Pliny with literary interests, (2) Septicius Clarus, the dedicant of the entire correspondence (books one through nine, at least), (3) Suetonius, the scholar, biographer, and acquaintance of Pliny, and (4) Calpurnia, Pliny's wife. Suetonius appears to be the most likely candidate, given his scholarly interests and his possible presence in Bithynia contemporary with Pliny. However, since the relationship between Suetonius was uneasy, it is not clear that Suetonius was especially interested in being connected to Pliny.

⁶⁴ Noreña 266.

that made both him and Trajan look good.⁶⁵ Therefore, if Book 10 was published in Pliny's lifetime, it would have created and perpetuated a sterling image and reputation for both Pliny and Trajan for posterity while at the same time improving their public personae among their contemporaries.⁶⁶

Stadter adopts a somewhat different and slightly more aggressive agenda in discussing the issue of the publication of Book 10 by focusing more on Pliny's possible role as an editor of the book. He first acknowledges that, if Pliny did indeed die before Book 10 could be published (as so many scholars have assumed in the past), someone else, perhaps Suetonius, must have published the letters using archival copies.⁶⁷ Stadter is not persuaded by this hypothesis, and proceeds one step beyond Noreña's argument to posit that Pliny did not die before he had a chance to edit the letters in Book 10 himself, thus transforming the letters from what might have been an "incredibly useful, unadulterated excerpt from the imperial archives" into a body of texts carefully compiled and edited by Pliny himself and directed at the same audience as Books 1-9.⁶⁸ Because the publication of the correspondence presumably needed to be approved by the Emperor due to its occasional personal elements, whoever edited and published these letters would have been required to convince Trajan of the benefits of publication. Stadter argues that Pliny himself would be in the perfect position to explain the benefits to Trajan and ensure his support of the letters' publication.

⁶⁵ Noreña 269; it is also probably that Trajan would have approved of such a mission.

⁶⁶ Noreña 272.

⁶⁷ Stadter 62.

⁶⁸ Stadter 62-3.

Several key pieces of evidence are advanced by Stadter to support the presence of an editor in the letters of Book 10. First of all, the book has been assembled so that each letter is paired with its response, despite the improbability and impracticality of such a practice at the time of exchange. The distance between Bithynia and Pontus and Rome was great, likely too great to allow the proper one-to-one exchange of letters from Pliny to Trajan. It is possible – even likely – that Pliny kept an archive of his responses from Trajan as well as copies of his own letters and painstakingly filed Trajan’s responses in their proper order as he received them. Regardless of Pliny’s or any other editor’s method of keeping track of the letters, the resolution to include replies from Trajan, and to place them with the proper letters of Pliny’s, must have been the decision of an editor.⁶⁹ Additionally, we do not have the place and date for any of the letters in Book 10. Likewise, we are missing any proper greeting or salutation at the end.⁷⁰

Stadter also observes that Pliny (if he was indeed the editor) chose not to include certain responses from Trajan. While Sherwin-White and Williams believe that Pliny simply forgot to collect these letters, Stadter believes that, as editor, Pliny omitted them deliberately. They were, according to Stadter, “not useful to his purpose,”⁷¹ namely, to portray Trajan and himself working cooperatively as stellar provincial administrators. It is possible that Trajan realized Pliny’s talent for epistolography and this correspondence was the result. Perhaps, with Trajan’s approval, Pliny attempted to fashion his exchanges

⁶⁹ Stadter 64.

⁷⁰ Stadter points out that this is consistent with Pliny’s practice in compiling/publishing his other nine books of letters; in both cases, the letters are removed from their historical context and made accessible to a timeless literary world (64-5).

⁷¹ Stadter 66.

with Trajan as the model correspondence with an Emperor which portrayed both of them to their educated and refined readers as the model senator and *Princeps*.⁷²

Stadter's argument for Pliny as his own editor rests on an assumption about Pliny's desire and attempt to represent the best of himself and the Emperor to Rome's public by asserting that they administered the provinces justly and honestly while engaging in displays of mutual respect and admiration. If this is the case, as Stadter argues, then Book 10 is a "sophisticated exercise in imperial self-representation" which remains similar to Books 1-9 but merely functions to different ends. Books 1-9 display the idealized form of senatorial life that Pliny is attempting to live, while Book 10, through selection and omission, portrays the "Trajanic ideology of rule."⁷³ Having accomplished such a portrayal in 124 letters, Pliny could probably feel satisfied with his efforts on behalf of the *princeps* and his own *fama*. Stadter cites this and the fact that the frequency of the letter exchange dwindles towards the end of the correspondence to argue that the end of Book 10 is not as abrupt as is generally thought.⁷⁴ This seemingly abrupt ending is often cited by scholars as the result of Pliny's death, implying that he did not have time to finish compiling his collection before he died (or that he did not have the chance to compose a proper final letter). These scholars use this claim of a seemingly abrupt end to Book 10 to support the allegation that Pliny was not the editor of Book 10.

⁷² Stadter 68; the question of the audience of the letters will be addressed more fully below.

⁷³ Stadter 69.

⁷⁴ Stadter 70. Also, Woolf's two cents on publishing: He points out that the collection of letters in book 10 reads very well; how would this be the case if not intended for publishing? (Cicero's letters from Cilicia presume a great deal of shared information, whereas Pliny's do not). Also, Why does each letter only deal with one subject given the long distances of travel and time between letters? How do the letters create such a "well-rounded narrative" as a collection? Woolf clearly argues that the letters were intended for publication (97).

By challenging this assumption of an abrupt end, Stadter dismantles this argument against Pliny as the editor of Book 10.

Unfortunately, at this point in time, it is not possible to determine when exactly Pliny died. We cannot know whether he published and edited his tenth book of letters (or played a role in the assembly of the book). Thus, his specific agenda, and if he had edited and published them himself, remains a matter for speculation. Noreña and Stadter assume that it is critical to prove that Book 10 had a publisher or editor, and that such a person was probably Pliny himself. Even though Noreña in particular acknowledges that, as the scholarship currently stands, we cannot positively determine who published Book 10, he nevertheless maintains that Pliny was probably the publisher.

It may, however, be unnecessary to prove something that arguably cannot be securely demonstrated. Indeed, the focus of the argument about publication can (and should) be shifted away from a specific candidate for publication and shifted toward the process of publication itself. I propose that the crucial factor is not *who* published these letters, but the fact that there was *someone* out there who wished to make a statement about Trajan in the way that Book 10 does. Thus it matters most not who published them but that they were published at all. Whether or not Trajan or Pliny had any role or responsibility in the wider distribution of Book 10, the letter collection succeeded in contributing to the positive reputation and literary legacy of both figures.

Nevertheless, there is still some value in speculating about the motivation and agenda of the person who published these letters, and how they can guide our interpretation of the correspondence's function. Such speculation is valuable because it

allows us to consider why someone thought it was worth portraying Trajan (and Pliny) in a particular way to the public. The publisher must have been a person who stood to benefit from portraying Pliny and/or the Emperor (but not necessarily both) in a favorable light. Such a person was likely a member of the senatorial class of society, or at least someone who had access to imperial and senatorial correspondence. One objective of publishing the correspondence was likely to highlight a productive relationship between the Emperor and a senator, thus effectively using Pliny and Trajan as a model for future Emperors. By publicizing the originally private correspondence between Trajan and Pliny (or what appeared to be private, based on the expectations of the genre of letter-writing), the publisher might have hoped to display a genuinely positive working relationship which allowed them both to ensure the smooth running of the empire. Trajan is portrayed as behaving benevolently and appropriately towards the provinces, and Pliny is ready to assist the *princeps* in any way the Emperor requires.

Regardless of the identity of the individual who edited and published Book 10, Pliny himself preserves an important role in the creation of Trajan's image. But the question remains: for whom was Pliny creating this image? We can speculate that Pliny's letters were intended to be read by elite Romans, particularly members of the senatorial class (and perhaps by others as well, but for the purposes of this argument it is enough to emphasize that the elites composed one likely group of readers of Pliny's letters). The senatorial elite was a powerful group with whom (both Pliny and) Trajan needed to curry favor. By displaying his amicable relationship with the Emperor, Pliny was benefiting both himself and Trajan in establishing good relations between a high-ranking senator

and the Emperor. The seemingly naturalistic genre of letter-writing makes their exchange appear more real, less contrived and perhaps more indicative of what actually transpired between Emperor and senator.

In truth, however, these letters were meant to be published and Pliny seems to have had the particular image of Trajan he wished to construct in mind at all times. Through this particular form of communication Pliny invents a persona for Trajan which is believable, in part, because it is disseminated through letters and not a historical text. The more real nature of letters (discussed further below) and the type of exchange between two people that they record, allowed Pliny to construct a credible image of the Emperor through their correspondence. Readers of the letters probably assumed that Trajan and Pliny communicated openly and less guardedly in theoretically “private” letters than they would through official edicts or a historical text composed by someone else. Whether or not Trajan wrote his own replies to Pliny’s letters, it would have appeared that he did indeed compose his letters, thus implying that the letters expressed his own genuine thoughts. The fact that Pliny (and outwardly) Trajan wrote these letters to each other in a cooperative exchange gives the impression of real, everyday communication. Once Trajan’s image was constructed through the writing and compilation of this letter collection, Pliny and/or the unknown publisher probably knew that it needed to be circulated among those elite and influential groups in Rome just discussed to help cement the portrait of the Emperor as a *civilis princeps* who managed the provinces well.

If the publisher hoped to gain from Trajan and Pliny's flattering portraits, it would seem that he or she would want to attach his or her name to the publication of such an important document.⁷⁵ Since we are lacking this name, we might assume that it has simply been lost in transmission. Alternatively, it was removed deliberately at some point, or was never included in the first place. But again, this name is not as important as the fact that this editor seems to have aimed to render Pliny and Trajan as amicably as possible, and may have shaped their deeds to be more amenable to such a portrayal. Assuming manipulations took place, we must acknowledge that we probably do not possess the full picture of Pliny the perfect senator and *legatus Augusti* and of Trajan the senatorially conscientious provincial administrator. Having acknowledged these potential caveats in the study and analysis of Book 10 and its publication, it is now time to consider just how effective this carefully constructed portrait of Pliny and Trajan might have been.

⁷⁵ This is to assume that book ten, and Pliny's letters in general, were viewed as "important documents" in antiquity. The person who published the letters would have certainly wished us to think so, especially if he or she benefited from their publication. Therefore, let us assume, for the purposes of this paper, that the correspondence in question carried some value.

The Performance of the Role of *Optimus Princeps*

The exchange of letters between senator and Emperor offered Trajan the opportunity to perform the role not just of any *princeps* but of the *Optimus Princeps*. But what makes this collection of letters particularly well-suited to such a task? What do letters do that, for instance, more conventional historiographical or biographical texts do not or cannot do? On the one hand, in theory at least, Trajan was a major participant in the construction of his image through Pliny's letters. He wrote (or his *ab epistulis* wrote on his behalf, we can not be sure which) roughly half of the letters in Book 10. Highlighted here is the reciprocal nature of letter-writing as a genre. There is not simply one person involved in this correspondence and its portrayal of the emperor's dealings with the provinces (Pliny), but in fact (at least) two (Trajan and/or his *ab epistulis*). One could argue that both Pliny and Trajan are performing, for each other, for the elite of Rome, and for whomever else read these letters once they were published.⁷⁶

Letters function differently than history in several important ways. While both can communicate historical information, historical texts are intended to be read widely by the general population (giving them a different context, different focuses and different standards of truth and acceptable embellishment), whereas letters, for the most part, are a form of information sharing based on the pretense of privacy (even if some letters never are, and are never intended to be, truly private). However, when letters are composed for future publication (as Pliny's almost certainly were), the relationship between the correspondents is also publicized and emphasized. Letters, as a genre, draw attention to

⁷⁶ A discussion of possible audiences will follow below.

the relationship between the two people involved in the correspondence. Historical writing, on the other hand, places more emphasis on the series of events that take place at a particular time and location and is ostensibly more objective than letter writing. In this case, however, book 10's publication would seem to imply that Pliny and Trajan have nothing to hide and wish to advertise the productive and positive nature of their relationship.

The nature and content of letters can also be quite different from that of history. Letters simply record specific moments in time and tend not to provide us with an overview or any significant amount of context. Thus letters are usually more subjective and not as retrospective and analytical as history. In turn, they provided opportunities for Pliny and Trajan to perform the roles of the good senator and the good Emperor, respectively, rather than for Pliny to give a conventional history of Trajan's reign. The letter exchange preserves a different, more "relationally focused" kind of history which records and demonstrates the type of relationship a high-ranking senator might have with an Emperor as they worked together to effectively manage one of the provinces.⁷⁷

If Trajan understood that letters could operate in this way, he may have been more willing to allow Pliny to publish them, as they were not ostensibly an historical commentary on or catalogue of his deeds but a series of demonstrations of his effective management of the empire. These letters did in fact serve these functions as well, but at the same time preserved the pretense of private conversation between the Emperor and Pliny. Letters could accomplish such a purpose particularly well because many people

⁷⁷ And therefore providing a model for other provincial governors, as well as other future Emperors.

composed and read letters as a regular part of their lives. In this way, the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan appears to be a natural window into the lives of Pliny and Trajan, not some biased or artificial account of events. Letters also seem to possess a more personal and naturalized quality; letter writing is an activity that takes place between friends and confidants and might not appear to be endowed with the same political agenda as history. However, as has become apparent, Pliny's letters to Trajan were rather less than natural communiqués. Rather we can view them as the strings with which the puppet-master Pliny shapes the movements of his Emperor and the stage on which Pliny and Trajan perform their roles as the ideal senator, Emperor and provincial administrators.

The Letters of Book 10

Let us now examine a broad sampling of the letters of Book 10 in order to illustrate the performative nature of Pliny and Trajan's correspondence and the ways in which these letters allow Trajan to play the part of an Emperor who is an expert at provincial management (in large part because he knows how to delegate duties to a talented senator like Pliny). As discussed above, an important aspect of provincial administration was securing the loyalty of the provincials after a sometimes violent and protracted conquest of their territory. Even when rulers ceded their land peacefully to Roman rule, the task nonetheless remained to ensure that the conquered provincials understood to whom their allegiance was now owed. In a way, the letters in Book 10 serve to justify the conquest of territory throughout the empire under Trajan because they demonstrate that, once a people is subject to Rome, they will be dealt with fairly and attentively.

Even though Bithynia and Pontus were annexed peacefully by Rome in 74 BCE and 64 BCE respectively, Trajan's thoughtful management of that province as displayed in Pliny's *Letters* can be seen as a template for dealing with all other provinces. At a time when the empire had reached what would be its greatest extent, and some of the provinces were far distant from Rome, it was imperative that provincial governments and peoples respect the authority of an Emperor whom they would probably never see in person. The Emperor would, however, take measures to ensure that his personal authority was felt by the people in the provinces. He provided for the frequent dispensation of numerous documents throughout the provinces, so that all laws and edicts might be

posted and distributed appropriately by the provincial governor, and so that people might have ample opportunities to familiarize themselves with these important documents.⁷⁸

The role of the governor is highlighted in this context because the government at Rome saw no need to send copies of its decrees to every single town in a province. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the provincial governor to insure that all smaller towns and villages were well-informed concerning the laws and power of Rome, and that they attributed the text to the Emperor himself.⁷⁹ It was equally important for the people of Rome to know that their *princeps* was protecting their interests through his careful management of the wealth and resources of the provinces since the city of Rome depended so much on outside supplies to survive, as discussed briefly above. In performing the part of a good provincial administrator who entrusted the care of his provinces to capable senators like Pliny, Trajan fulfilled these needs.

Several letters in Book 10 display the results of this cultivation of the loyalty of the people of Bithynia and Pontus. *Ep.* 10.100 from Pliny is particularly enthusiastic in declaring the loyalty of soldiers and civilians alike, and Trajan's response, 10.101 follows the regular formula of thanks followed in his responses to other such letters of Pliny:

Vota, domine, priore anno nuncupata alacres laetique persolvimus novaque rursus certante commilitonum et provincialium pietate suscepimus, precati deos ut te remque publicam florentem et incolumem ea benignitate servarent, quam super magnas plurimasque virtutes praecipua sanctitate obsequio deorum honore meruisti.

⁷⁸ The Roman government acknowledged that information traveled slowly, and thus accommodated for a 30-day grace period from the time of the posting of a new law or decree so that the provincials might become familiar with the law/decreed. The government thus accepted notable responsibility for the wide-spread promulgation of texts. (Ando 97)

⁷⁹ Ando 83; 113. The (ideal) close working relationship between the Emperor and his provincial administrators is thus demonstrated by the Emperor's interest in spreading his word through the agency of the governor.

We have dedicated our vows, Sir, expressed last year, the people enthusiastic and joyful, and we have undertaken new vows again amongst the competing loyalty of the soldiers and the provincials. We have prayed to the gods that they preserve you and the state, prosperous and safe and, on account of their benevolence, grant you what you deserve, in particular on account of your sanctity, obedience, and respect for the gods.

Trajan's reply, while seemingly formulaic, acknowledges the loyalty of the provincials and their governor, Pliny:

Solvisse vota dis immortalibus te praeunte pro mea incolumitate commilitones cum provincialibus laetissimo consensu et in futurum nuncupasse libenter, mi Secunde carissime, cognovi litteris tuis.

I have learned from your letter that, by your dictation, the vows were discharged on behalf of my safety by the soldiers and the provincials amidst communal rejoicing and that you have dedicated them freely for the future, my dear Pliny.

It would appear that Pliny included these letters to demonstrate that Trajan had successfully cultivated the obedience and allegiance of his subjects in Bithynia and Pontus since they have taken up their new vows with competing loyalty (*certante pietate*).⁸⁰ This phrase demonstrates the importance of maintaining provincial loyalty, and the people of Bithynia and Pontus are competing with one another to see who could show the most *pietas* for their "father" the Roman Emperor. Provincials who are "contending in *pietas*" would have been the ideal subjects. Not only are they loyal to Rome but they are trying to outdo each other in their displays of loyalty. By reporting such a situation to Trajan, Pliny both makes the Emperor happy and further substantiates his claims that Trajan is an Emperor who deals benevolently and effectively with the provinces and their people. While such letters are rather formulaic, and we might question whether genuine

⁸⁰ See also *Eps.* 10.35, 36, 52, 53, 102 and 103.

emotions are being expressed, it is important to remember that it is the image itself that matters.

Pliny's letter emphasizes the many and great virtues of Trajan (*magnas plurimasque virtutes*), and Trajan's response shows his gratitude for the general rejoicing and assured faithfulness of the people (*cum provincialibus laetissimo consensus*). The force of the word *consensus* is quite significant in this context because it implies agreement and consent on the part of the people, a harmonious unanimity in their loyalty and support of the Emperor and his policies. Instead of being forced to comply and submit to the will of Rome, and instead of demonstrating the propensity for formulating rebellions, the people of Bithynia and Pontus are in *consensus* in their desire to show loyalty to the *princeps*.⁸¹

While the loyalty of the provincials was clearly a priority for the Emperor to guarantee the smooth functioning of the empire, Trajan also had to address the proper functioning of the province of Bithynia and Pontus itself. The province had been experiencing financial difficulties and general unrest prior to Pliny's appointment, and the Emperor realized that a competent and experienced governor was required to set affairs in order. Affairs had been in disorder in the province for some time, and relations between local populations and Roman administrators were difficult, partly evidenced by the fact that the people had brought charges against the two previous governors. The political and social climate in Bithynia and Pontus was so disturbed that Trajan banned

⁸¹ For a further and more general discussion of the term *consensus* see Ando, Clifford (2000). *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*. University of California Press, especially pp. 133-144.

all political societies. This ban comes up in several letters, for example the letter in which Pliny enquires into the possibility of forming a volunteer fire brigade but is denied by Trajan because of the danger of large groups assembling.⁸² Such circumstances necessitated the appointment of a thorough and competent governor, like Pliny, who could work with the Emperor to address the issues and report his success.

Trajan's aim was to have Pliny inspect the towns of the province, report on any major problems he encountered which required the emperor's attention and take care of smaller issues immediately. Pliny was probably a particularly appropriate candidate for such a task because of his previous knowledge of the province after handling the defense of two of its governors and his reputation as an authority on finances.⁸³

After Pliny arrived in the province on the 17th of September (as letter 17b informs us), he immediately inquires about sorting out the troubles plaguing the local cities:

*Dispice, domine, an necessarium putes mittere huc mensorem. Videntur enim non mediocres pecuniae posse revocari a curatoribus operum, si mensurae fideliter agantur. Ita certe prospicio ex ratione Prusensium, quam cum maxime tracto.*⁸⁴

Consider, Sir, whether you think it necessary to send a land-surveyor here. For it seems that not a trivial amount of money is able to be recovered by a supervisor of the project, if it was led by a trustworthy surveyor. I foresee it thus, certainly, from the accounts of Prusa which I am managing as carefully as possible.

Pliny emphasizes the great care with which he is managing the accounts of Prusa (*quam cum maxime tracto*) and expresses his desire to save a great deal of money (*non mediocres pecuniae posse revocari*) provided that the Emperor send him a surveyor.

⁸² *Ep.* 10.33 (Pliny) and 10.34 (Trajan).

⁸³ Radice 15.

⁸⁴ *Ep.* 10.17b.2.

Trajan's reply makes clear what he expects of his governor and what the local people should expect from Pliny:

*Provinciales, credo, prospectum sibi a me intellegent. Nam et tu dabis operam, ut manifestum sit illis electum te esse, qui ad eosdem mei loco mittereris. Rationes autem in primis tibi rerum publicarum excutiendae sunt; nam et esse eas vexatas satis constat. Mensores vix etiam iis operibus, quae aut Romae aut in proximo fiunt, sufficientes habeo; sed in omni provincia inveniuntur, quibus credi possit, et ideo non deerunt tibi, modo velis diligenter excutere.*⁸⁵

The provincials, I believe, will understand that they are watched over by you on my orders. For you also will pay attention so that it is clear to them that I chose you, you who will have been sent to them in my place. Nevertheless the accounts of the public affairs are to be examined first by you, for it is evident that they are troubled. I have barely a sufficient number of surveyors for these projects which are taking place at either Rome or nearby; but they can be found in all the provinces, those able to be trusted, and indeed they will not be lacking for you, if only you choose to search them out diligently.

After the conventional greetings and thanks for Pliny's safe arrival in Bithynia and Pontus, Trajan asserts that the provincials will know that he is looking out for their own interests (*prospectum sibi a me*) and that Pliny has been chosen and sent there by Trajan to perform a particular service (*electum te esse, qui ad eosdem mei loco mittereris*), namely that of fixing the finances. This first part of Trajan's response makes clear that he is actively involved in protecting the interests of his subjects, whether it is by looking out for them personally or by providing them with a governor who will do the same. Additionally, he makes sure that Pliny performs his role as he has been sent by Trajan to do. The Emperor has no *mensores* to spare, but he reminds Pliny that there are sufficient land-surveyors in the provinces if the senator wishes to diligently search them out. Trajan

⁸⁵ *Ep.* 10.18.2-3.

has delegated – a skill necessary for any Emperor – and Pliny will execute his task accordingly.

These two letters set the tone for Pliny's provincial administration, and a similar working relationship is evident in a number of later letters. Pliny, following Trajan's orders, continues to examine the financial status of the major cities of his province. He discovers that the citizens of Nicomedia have not been managing their money wisely in their attempt to build a new aquaduct:

In aquae ductum, domine, Nicomedenses impenderunt HS XXX CCCXVIII, qui imperfectus adhuc omissus, destructus etiam est; rursus in alium ductum erogata sunt CC. Hoc quoque relicto novo impendio est opus, ut aquam habeant, qui tantam pecuniam male perdiderunt...

*Sed in primis necessarium est mitti a te vel aquilegem vel architectum, ne rursus eveniat quod accidit. Ego illud unum affirmo, et utilitatem operis et pulchritudinem saeculo tuo esse dignissimam.*⁸⁶

The citizens of Nicomedia, Sir, have spent 3,318,000 sesterces on an aquaduct which was demolished even at that point when it was incomplete and neglected; then again 200,000 sesterces were paid out on another aquaduct. This also was abandoned, but there is need for another expenditure to be made, so that they might have water, they who badly wasted so much money... But first it is necessary that either a water diviner or an architect be sent by you, lest what happened before should happen again. And I myself will assert this one thing, that the utility of the work and its beauty will be most worthy of your reign.

Pliny is incensed because, despite having spent vast sums of money on two separate occasions, the city still lacks a water supply – a clearly crucial feature of any city. Like any good governor, Pliny wishes to prevent a third failure. In an effort to secure a clean water supply for Nicomedia as soon as possible, he sends an urgent message to the Emperor. Trajan's reply responds to this urgency and encourages Pliny to tackle the problem immediately in addition to discovering who was to blame for the initial failures:

⁸⁶ *Ep.* 10.37.1,3.

*Curandum est, ut aqua in Nicomedensem civitatem perducatur. Vere credo te ea, qua debebis, diligentia hoc opus aggressurum. Sed medius fidius ad eandem diligentiam tuam pertinet inquirere, quorum vitio ad hoc tempus tantam pecuniam Nicomedenses perdiderint, ne, dum inter se gratificantur, et incohaverint aquae ductus et reliquerint. Quid itaque compereris, perfer in notitiam meam.*⁸⁷

It must be arranged that water be brought in to the citizens of Nicomedia. Truly I believe that you, since you will be responsible for it, will approach this task with diligence. But for god's sake, on account of this diligence of yours, it concerns you to inquire, by whose fault at this time that the Nicomedians lost so much money, lest, while people profit amongst themselves, they start building aqueducts and then abandon them. And then what you will have found out, offer to me in a notice.

Trajan expects Pliny to both fix the problem of the money-squandering aqueduct, but also to discover who is responsible for such a debacle lest someone should gain illicitly from the misfortune of the citizens of Nicomedia. Trajan appeals to Pliny's *diligentia* (twice) and directs him to take a certain course of action. It is clear that Trajan is playing the part of the involved and attentive Emperor when he requests that Pliny report the result of his inquiry (*quid itaque compereris, perfer in notitiam meam*). Although many of Trajan's letters implicitly seem to expect an update from his governor, in this letter he actually asks directly for it, perhaps demonstrating the perceived gravity of the situation and thus explaining his correspondingly serious response.

In order to prevent further deterioration of the financial security of the cities of his province, Pliny continued to investigate the accounts of the local governments. By including such information in his letters to Trajan, Pliny was further publicizing the good work he and the Emperor were doing to ensure the faithful cooperation and loyalty of

⁸⁷ *Ep.* 10.38.1.

these Roman subjects. In a letter to Trajan about the city of Apamea, Pliny seeks Trajan's advice concerning the inspection of the town's accounts:

*Cum vellem, domine, Apameae cognoscere publicos debitores et redditum et impendia, responsum est mihi cupere quidem universos, ut a me rationes coloniae legerentur, numquam tamen esse lectas ab ullo proconsulum; habuisse privilegium et vetustissimum morem arbitrio suo rem publicam administrare. Exegi ut quae dicebant quaeque recitabant libello complecterentur; quem tibi qualem acceperam misi, quamvis intellegerem pleraque ex illo ad id, de quo quaeritur, non pertinere. Te rogo ut mihi praeire digneris, quid me putes observare debere. Vereor enim ne aut excessisse aut non implesse officii mei partes videar.*⁸⁸

When I wished, Sir, to examine the public debtors of Apamea, both revenues and expenditures, they told me that indeed everyone wished that the accounts of the colony be considered by me, but that they had never been red by another governor; and that they had the privilege and the most ancient custom of managing their own affairs by their own judgement. I weighed what they said and what they recited and summed it up in a petition; which, the sort of things they said, I have sent to you, although I know that the majority of the information from it does not pertain to that which you inquired about. I ask you that you think it worthy to dictate to me what you think I ought to heed. For I fear lest I seem either to go beyond or to not fulfill a part of my duty.

It becomes evident from this letter that, since Apamea was a Roman settlement (*coloniae*), no previous governors had inspected the city's accounts and the citizens were accustomed to managing their own financial affairs (*habuisse privilegium et vetustissimum morem arbitrio suo rem publicam administrare*). Trajan, in his response, attempts to balance control with flexibility as he instructs Pliny on how to handle the situation:

Libellus Apamenorum, quem epistulae tuae iunxeras, remisit mihi necessitatem perpendendi qualia essent, propter quae videri volunt eos, qui pro consulibus hanc provinciam obtinuerunt, abstinuisse inspectione rationum suarum, cum ipse ut eas inspiceret non recusaverint. Remuneranda est igitur probitas eorum, ut iam nunc

⁸⁸ Ep. 10.47

*sciant hoc, quod inspecturus es, ex mea voluntate salvis, quae habent, privilegiis esse facturum.*⁸⁹

The petition of the Apameans, which you had joined to your letter, does not seem to me that it is of the sort which is necessary to be assessed carefully, on account of the fact that they wish it to be evident that those provincial governors who occupied this province, abstained from an inspection of their accounts, when they do not refuse these very inspections that you would conduct. Therefore, their honesty should be rewarded, so that they know that this inspection now, which you are carrying out, is at my express wish, and will be done without diminishing their privileges which they still possess.

Trajan plays the role of diplomatic leader quite well in this case, as he chooses to ignore the previous dearth of inspections and focus on the current willingness of the citizens to display their accounts to Pliny (*cum ipse ut eas inspiceret non recusaverint*). The Emperor also wants Pliny to clarify that he is not infringing on the privileged rights of the city to administer its own affairs. Pliny makes a special inspection on this one occasion at the express wish of the Emperor (*quod inspecturus es, ex mea voluntate salvis, quae habent, privilegiis esse facturum*).

It is possible that, in submitting to such an inspection, the citizens were being forced to do something that they were somewhat reluctant to do. However, the fact that they made their accounts available to Pliny so readily further demonstrates their loyalty to Rome and their willingness to trust the Emperor and his provincial administrators. In this case, the honesty of the provincials (*probitas eorum*) demonstrates to Trajan that they deserve their existing

⁸⁹ *Ep.* 10.48

privileges. Pliny's tribute to their honesty does seem more prescriptive than descriptive, however. By praising them he encourages them to behave in such a way that merits this praise. The letter also seems designed to demonstrate that, simply because the Emperor orders Pliny to conduct a thorough investigation of their finances, the citizens are not being punished or treated with suspicion. After this one investigation, management of Apamea's finances will be returned to the control of its citizens, as was customary. In response to the honesty and openness of the citizens, the Emperor agrees to trust them in return and to make this examination a one-time occurrence.

The province of Bithynia and Pontus did not merely have financial troubles, but social ones as well. The correspondence shows that Trajan is just as capable at instituting social reforms as he was at revamping the financial accounts of the provincial cities. One such issue, which pertained to criminals sentenced to the mines, the arena or other similar punishments, was in clear need of attention. A number of these sentenced men had apparently worked their way into public jobs and were receiving a salary for their work. By the time Pliny discovered the loophole, some of the men were old and had been sentenced more than ten years earlier. Pliny objects to the prospect that these men, sentenced criminals, would continue to live at public expense. He asks Trajan's advice on the situation, and informs the Emperor:

Quaeres fortasse, quem ad modum evenerit, ut poenis in quas damnati

*erant exsolverentur: et ego quaesii, sed nihil comperi, quod affirmare tibi possim. Ut decreta quibus damnati erant proferebantur, ita nulla monumenta quibus liberati probarentur. Erant tamen, qui dicerent deprecantes iussu proconsulum legatorumve dimissos. Addebat fidem, quod credibile erat neminem hoc ausum sine auctore.*⁹⁰

Perhaps you might ask how it happened that they were released from the punishment to which they were condemned: and I also asked that question, but have discovered nothing which I am able to confirm for you. Even though the sentences with which they were condemned were discovered, no records by which they were freed were shown to be real. Nevertheless there are those who state that by the order of the governor or his legate, those begging for freedom were released. There was added faith [ie in their testimony] because it was believable that no one would dare this without authority.

Pliny has attempted to fulfill his role as the effective and thorough administrator but he has found that he must turn to Trajan for further advice and assistance. In doing so, he offers the *princeps* the opportunity to perform his role of an Emperor who knows how to manage affairs in the provinces. Cooperation like this was, in any case, the ideal way for this relationship to manifest itself because it allowed both Trajan and Pliny to perform their respective roles appropriately. Trajan, in turn, reminds Pliny of his purpose in Bithynia and Pontus and then instructs him in handling the situation:

*Meminerimus idcirco te in istam provinciam missum, quoniam multa in ea emendanda apparuerint. Erit autem vel hoc maxime corrigendum, quod qui damnati ad poenam erant, non modo ea sine auctore, ut scribis, liberati sunt, sed etiam in condicionem proborum ministrorum retrahuntur.*⁹¹

Let us remember on what account I sent you to that province: because of the many issues apparent in it that needed to be addressed. However there will be indeed this great problem to be fixed, which is that not only were those who were condemned to punishment freed without authority, as you write, but they were also brought back into a contract of honest service.

⁹⁰ *Ep.* 10.31.4-5.

⁹¹ *Ep.* 10.32.1

Trajan's blunt reminder of Pliny's mission in his province also serves to remind us that the Emperor and Pliny are tackling the problem rather than sitting idly by. In the remainder of the letter, the Emperor provides Pliny with a fair and well-conceived method of dealing with such illegally released men. Trajan is establishing precedent through Pliny's governorship while, from the local government's point of view, he is relieving them of a number of welfare cases. Once again, the Emperor performs the role of *pater patriae* by taking the reforms of Pliny's province seriously.

Another issue concerning the status of persons is raised in Pliny's *Ep.* 65, in which he inquires about the fate of foundlings in the province. While Pliny has searched for a case to provide precedent, he can find none except an outdated edict referring to the Peloponnese and some letters of questionable authenticity. Ultimately, as he so often does, Pliny decides to leave the matter to Trajan's discretion:

*Magna, domine, et ad totam provinciam pertinens quaestio est de condicione et alimentis eorum, quos vocant 'threptous'. In qua ego auditis constitutionibus principum, quia nihil inveniebam aut proprium aut universale, quod ad Bithynos referretur, consulendum te existimavi, quid observari velles; neque putavi posse me in eo, quod auctoritatem tuam posceret, exemplis esse contentum... [Regarding the edict and letters:] quae ideo tibi non misi, quia et parum emendata et quaedam non certae fidei videbantur, et quia vera et emendata in scriniis tuis esse credebam.*⁹²

A serious inquiry, Sir, and one pertaining to the whole province, concerns the situation and sustenance of those who they call "foundlings." I looked into established decrees of the emperors about this issue, but since I discovered nothing either particular to this case or universal, which could be applied to Bithynia, I decided that you should be consulted as to what you wish to be heeded; nor did I think that I would be able, in this instance, to be satisfied with precedents, since the matter should demand your authority...

⁹² *Ep.* 10.65.1-2, 3.

Which [edict and letters] I have not sent to you, because they seemed both too little corrected and each of uncertain trustworthiness, and because I believe that true and corrected copies must be in your files.

This appears to be a case for which Pliny simply does not possess the resources, thus compelling him to ask Trajan to come up with a solution. When the Emperor can not find a previous rule which can be applied to all provinces, he takes the reins and establishes his own law dealing with foundlings in Bithynia and Pontus:

*Epistulae sane sunt Domitiani ad Avidium Nigrinum et Armenium Brocchum, quae fortasse debeant observari: sed inter eas provincias, de quibus rescriptis, non est Bithynia; et ideo nec assertionem denegandam iis qui ex eius modi causa in libertatem vindicabuntur puto, neque ipsam libertatem redimendam pretio alimentorum.*⁹³

There are the letters from Domitian to Avidius Nigrinus and Armenius Brocchus, which perhaps ought to be heeded: But Bithynia is not among these provinces, concerning which he wrote back in reply; and therefore I do not think that those who claim freedom in this way should be denied to make a statement, nor should their freedom have to be bought by themselves for the price of their maintenance.

Questions of legal status are generally taken quite seriously by Trajan, and the fate of foundlings is no exception. His acknowledgement of their originally free status allows them to declare publicly their freedom from the families that rescued them and raised them (granted, as slaves) without having to refund the cost of rearing them (*neque ipsam libertatem redimendam pretio alimentorum*). However, just as neither Trajan nor Pliny could find a general rule that applied to foundlings throughout the empire, there seems to have been similar ambiguity concerning the treatment of slaves who found themselves in difficult situations. In these cases as well, Pliny and Trajan had to work together to find a solution, and in the end the Emperor generally has the final say.

⁹³ *Ep.* 10.66.2.

One particularly relevant case concerns the discovery of two slaves among a group of army recruits. Pliny knows how important the army is to Trajan (*ut te conditorem disciplinae militaris*) and suspects that the Emperor will have an opinion regarding the punishment (or method of dealing with) the slaves.⁹⁴ Pliny does, however, further clarify his reason for deferment to the *princeps* in this case:

*Ipse enim dubito ob hoc maxime quod, ut iam dixerant sacramento, ita nondum distributi in numeros erant. Quid ergo debeam sequi rogo, domine, scribas, praesertim cum pertineat ad exemplum.*⁹⁵

On account of this very fact I have the greatest doubt because they had already spoken the oath, but they were not yet assigned among the ranks. Therefore, I ask that you write what course I ought to follow, Sir, especially since it concerns a precedent.

Pliny hesitates primarily because of the sanctity of the military oath. He is unsure whether it is too late for the slaves to be unenrolled without breaking that oath. The greater issue in this instance is likely the cohesion and effectiveness of the army itself. This could not be compromised if the empire was to function smoothly. The Emperor admittedly relied a great deal on his soldiers to keep the peace in conquered or annexed territories, and Pliny was probably concerned that the discovery of slave recruits, after they had taken the oath of allegiance, would negatively affect troop morale. Trajan addresses the issue calmly but decisively. He confirms the seriousness of the situation by including execution as a possible punishment (depending on the situation):

Refert autem, voluntarii se obtulerint an lecti sint vel etiam vicarii dati. Lecti <si> sunt, inquisitio peccavit; si vicarii dati, penes eos culpa est qui dederunt; si ipsi, cum haberent condicionis suae conscientiam, venerunt, animadvertendum in

⁹⁴ *Ep.* 10.29.1.

⁹⁵ *Ep.* 10.29.2.

*illos erit. Neque enim multum interest, quod nondum per numeros distributi sunt. Ille enim dies, quo primum probati sunt, veritatem ab iis originis suae exegit.*⁹⁶

Nevertheless it matters, whether they offered themselves as volunteers or were conscripts or were even given as substitutes. If they were conscripts, the investigation made a mistake; if they were given as substitutes, the fault lies in the hands of those who provided them; if they came themselves, when they had knowledge of their status, there will be the need for punishment for them. For it does not matter much that they were not yet enrolled in the ranks. For on that day on which they were first approved, the truth of their origins should have been examined.

Trajan's attention to the details of the case and the specific circumstances of the two slaves' enlistment demonstrate further his ability (and perhaps his desire) to perform properly as a good Emperor should. In closely observing the functioning of the army units stationed in Bithynia and Pontus, the Emperor both protects the effectiveness of those units and the smooth operation of daily life.

An equally pressing social issue is brought to light in *Ep.* 96, namely the question of how to deal with confessed Christians in the province. The root of the problem concerns the proper measures to be taken in dealing with groups who broke the law against assembly. The Christians did indeed break this law, bringing them to Pliny's attention, and their religious beliefs proved to be an additional concern for the governor. Pliny begins the letter with what appears to be his standard salutation when he has a particularly touchy matter to discuss (*Sollemne est mihi, domine, omnia de quibus dubito ad te referre. Quis enim potest melius vel cunctationem meam regere vel ignorantiam instruere?*). It may be that Pliny's conciliatory tone is intended to render the Emperor more amenable to helping him.

⁹⁶ *Ep.* 10.30.1-2.

Pliny explains the difficulties he is having in deciding how to handle the problem of the Christians. He is unsure what to do if they confess to being Christians and what to do if they deny it. He describes his current tactics – if they will worship statues of the Emperor and the gods and revile the name of Christ, they are released, otherwise they are executed or sent back to Rome for trial – but admits that things are getting slightly out of hand since anonymous accusations have started circulating and increasing numbers of people are being accused. Towards the end of the letter, Pliny describes the ubiquity of the problem:

*Ideo dilata cognitione ad consulendum te decucurri. Visa est enim mihi res digna consultatione, maxime propter periclitantium numerum. Multi enim omnis aetatis, omnis ordinis, utriusque sexus etiam vocantur in periculum et vocabuntur. Neque civitates tantum, sed vicos etiam atque agros superstitionis istius contagio pervagata est.*⁹⁷

Therefore, with my examination postponed, I have hastened to consult you. For the matter seems to me worthy of your inquiry, on account of the great number of persons being put on trial. For many from every age, every class and even both sexes are being summoned into danger and will continue to be summoned. It has spread through contact not only the citizens but those in the towns and even the fields.

Pliny's concern for his province's stability is evident in this section. A great number of people will potentially be affected (*maxime propter periclitantium numerum*) of every age and class and of both sexes. The governor makes it clear that he wishes no more of his subjects to be tried until Trajan has weighed in on the issue and provided some clarification and authority for Pliny's actions. Again, such thoroughness and care represent the senator well and are reaffirmed by the Emperor in his response:

⁹⁷ *Ep.* 10.96.9.

*Actum quem debuisti, mi Secunde, in excutiendis causis eorum, qui Christiani ad te delati fuerant, secutus es. Neque enim in universum aliquid, quod quasi certam formam habeat, constitui potest. Conquirendi non sunt; si deferantur et arguantur, puniendi sunt, ita tamen ut, qui negaverit se Christianum esse idque re ipsa manifestum fecerit, id est supplicando dis nostris, quamvis suspectus in praeteritum, veniam ex paenitentia impetret. Sine auctore vero propositi libelli <in> nullo crimine locum habere debent. Nam et pessimi exempli nec nostri saeculi est.*⁹⁸

You have acted as you ought, my Pliny, in these cases that needed examining: those people who were Christians were handed over to you, and you followed the right course. For it is not possible to establish something universal that which follows any certain pattern. They must not be sought out; if they are delivered to you and if they are accused successfully, they must be punished, but yet if there is anyone who denies that he is a Christian and if this fact is made manifest, and if he is willing to supplicate our gods, however suspect his past behavior was, he should obtain pardon on account of his change of heart. But petitions put forward without authority ought to have no place in the charge. For this is the worst sort of model and not characteristic of our age.

At a time when Christianity was largely unknown but spreading, especially in the Eastern empire, Trajan's instructions must have appeared appropriate but also quite magnanimous. He emphasizes that Christians are not to be sought out purposefully (*conquirendi non sunt*), and if they deny that they are Christians, they are to be pardoned regardless of their past conduct (*quamvis suspectus in praeteritum*). Trajan seems to be suggesting that Pliny should treat the Christians well and fairly if, aside from being Christians, they otherwise display their loyalty to the empire and its *princeps* – even if they do not show that loyalty in the traditional way.

The Emperor also insists that Pliny should disregard all anonymously circulated pamphlets because they are the worst sort of model and not characteristic of the times (*nam et pessimi exempli nec nostri saeculi est*). Trajan's letter nevertheless does address

⁹⁸ Ep. 10.97

the issue, despite the fact that it is impossible to lay down a universal law to deal with the problem. The Emperor protects his people while doing so in a reasonable fashion. He demonstrates his authority and control but still conforms to Pliny's vision of him as good provincial administrator. All the same, it is interesting to note that Trajan chooses the least controversial and abrasive way of dealing with the potentially subversive group: he diffuses the situation while maintaining his image of a benevolent ruler.

A number of letters deal with building projects in the province. Trajan's building program in Rome advertised his accomplishments quite clearly and effectively (Trajan's forum and column, in particular), allowing the Emperor to project an image of himself as a powerful and successful ruler. Perhaps Pliny included letters about building projects in the provinces in order to extend Trajan's building program out into the empire, thus connecting the Emperor, however indirectly, to these local projects. Even though Trajan did not design the structures or their messages they were often dedicated to him, carving his connection to the provinces in stone. Pliny evidently felt obliged to ask the emperor's permission before sanctioning the construction of a new bathhouse or other such structures. One of the main reasons Pliny may have awaited Trajan's stamp of approval was financial, and Trajan rarely objected to such projects as long as the town itself could fund them. In *Ep.* 23, Pliny forwards a petition to the Emperor from the people of Prusa asking that they be allowed to rebuild their old, dilapidated bathhouse. Pliny describes the sources of funding and assures the Emperor that the plan is financially sound and will contribute to the splendor of Trajan's reign:

*Erit enim pecunia, ex qua fiat, primum ea quam revocare a privatis et exigere iam coepi; deinde quam ipsi erogare in oleum soliti parati sunt in opus balinei conferre; quod alioqui et dignitas civitatis et saeculi tui nitor postulat.*⁹⁹

For there will be money, from which it will be built, first of all that which I have begun to recover and examine from private individuals; next they are prepared to give over that which they are accustomed to pay out for olive oil for the baths; that is, furthermore, which demands both the worthiness of your reign and the splendor of your age.

Pliny calls attention to the fact that a new bathhouse will both enhance the dignity of the town (*dignitas civitatis*) and the splendor of Trajan's reign (*saeculi tui nitor*). By approving building projects in the towns of Bithynia and Pontus, Trajan was allowing and encouraging the improvement of the province as a whole – an act which would undoubtedly amplify his popularity. In effect, such magnificent provincial works completed in the emperor's name would serve as a provincial extension of Trajan's own elaborate projects in Rome proper. Additionally, in his reply, the Emperor wants to be assured that the citizens of Prusa will not have to forgo essential services after spending all their money on the bathhouse:

*Si instructio novi balinei oneratura vires Prusensium non est, possumus desiderio eorum indulgere, modo ne quid ideo aut intribuatur aut minus illis in posterum fiat ad necessarias erogationes.*¹⁰⁰

If by the building of a new bath the resources of Prusa are not overburdened, we should be able to grant their petition, provided that they are not taxed further nor that these shortages affect necessary services in the future.

Trajan also expresses his desire that no new taxes be raised to help pay for the baths, a demand that was undoubtedly quite popular with the people of Prusa. The Emperor was both looking out for the interests of his subjects (financially as well as socially and

⁹⁹ *Ep.* 10.23.2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ep.* 10.24

hygienically) and adding to the splendor of his reign. Pliny includes several more letters in which he encourages Trajan to take on or allow a project which enhances the glory of his name and age. In addition to Pliny's letter collection, physical monuments would contribute to the creation of Trajan's image for the future.¹⁰¹

One such letter serves as a follow up to an earlier letter in which Pliny inquired about an ambitious engineering project involving connecting a lake near the town of Nicomedia with the sea. If completed, the canal would save a great deal of time, labor and money and would attest to the greater glory and power of Rome and her Emperor (*Sed hoc ipso - feres enim me ambitiosum pro tua gloria - incitor et accendor, ut cupiam peragi a te quae tantum coeperant reges*).¹⁰² Pliny's expressed ambition for Trajan's greater glory demonstrates the way in which the senator works to invent the image of the Emperor that he projects throughout Book 10, namely, the Emperor who is good with the provinces. Although Trajan's response to this letter necessitates more research on Pliny's part, which he evidently accomplishes, the Emperor is more receptive to the idea of building such a canal after Pliny does his homework and reports his findings in *Ep.* 61:

Tu quidem, domine, providentissime vereris, ne commissus flumini atque ita mari lacus effluat; sed ego in re praesenti invenisse videor, quem ad modum huic periculo occurrerem...

*Verum et haec et alia multo sagacius conquirit explorabitque librator, quem plane, domine, debes mittere, ut polliceris. Est enim res digna et magnitudine tua et cura. Ego interim Calpurnio Macro clarissimo viro auctore te scripsi, ut libratores quam maxime idoneum mitteret.*¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ See, for example, *Eps.* 10.37, 41, 61, 70.

¹⁰² *Ep.* 10.41.5.

¹⁰³ *Ep.* 10.61.1, 5.

Indeed you, Sir, fear most wisely, lest the lake should flow out when it is joined with the river and then the sea; but I seem to have found, concerning the present matter, how I should oppose this danger...

But both these and other things can be investigated much more acutely and explored by an engineer whom surely, Sire, you ought to send, as you promised. For the matter is worthy both of your greatness and your attention. Meanwhile I have written to that distinguished man Calpurnius Macer, on your authority, that he send the most suitable engineer he has.

In the body of the letter, Pliny describes the measures the engineers could take to prevent draining the lake into the sea once the two were connected by the canal (thus addressing Trajan's primary concern from his earlier letter). Pliny also reminds the Emperor of his promise, in *Ep.* 42, to send an engineer out to survey the land between the lake and the sea. He assures him that the project will be worthy of his greatness and of his attention (*Est enim res digna et magnitudine tua et cura*). Trajan's reply enthusiastically commends Pliny for his hard work and dedication to solving the problem:

*Manifestum, mi Secunde carissime, nec prudentiam nec diligentiam tibi defuisse circa istum lacum, cum tam multa provisita habeas, per quae nec periclitetur exauriri et magis in usu nobis futurus sit. Elige igitur id quod praecipue res ipsa suaserit. Calpurnium Macrum credo facturum, ut te libratore instruat, neque provinciae istae his artificibus carent.*¹⁰⁴

It is clear, My dear Pliny, that good sense and diligence are not lacking to you concerning this lake, since you have so many provisions through which it is neither in danger of being drained and will be of great use to us in the future. Choose, therefore, the course which is particularly persuasive. I believe that Calpurnius Macer will provide you with an engineer, nor are those with those skills lacking to your province.

The Emperor is clearly impressed with Pliny's progress and rewards him with praise – and permission to move forward with his project. Trajan trusts Pliny to choose the right course of action (*elige igitur id quod praecipue res ipsa suaserit*) and thus gives him the

¹⁰⁴ *Ep.* 10.62.

power to decide how to go about building the canal. In this instance Trajan is not actually making specific decisions about how to handle the project, but he is giving Pliny the authority to make those decisions *in loco imperatoris*. Through his advice and permission, Trajan allows Pliny to successfully fulfill his duties as a provincial governor, and through his dedication and hard work, Pliny allows Trajan to play the role of the Emperor who is a masterful delegator and thus a skilled administrator of the provinces. Since Trajan cannot be everywhere at once, it is important that he has trustworthy and competent governors to act in his stead.

The letters discussed above, along with a number of others in Book 10, demonstrate quite clearly both the performative nature of Pliny and Trajan's roles in their letter exchange and the extent to which Trajan performs his role as an accomplished provincial administrator. The exchanges between the Emperor and his senatorial governor portray the positive working relationship between the two as well as the careful and thorough way both Trajan and Pliny address the matters at hand.

When comparing this letter collection to Pliny's *Panegyricus*, Pliny's two different but related missions become apparent. The *Panegyricus* establishes and lays out Pliny's vision for Trajan's reign whereas Book 10 seems to confirm the fulfillment of that vision. Thus, the *Panegyricus* might be viewed as a prescriptive text, installing Trajan as a model Emperor. However, the shining image we see in the *Panegyricus* is surely not the real Trajan but Pliny's construction of a hoped-for Emperor who might usher in another golden age reminiscent of Augustus' time. When Pliny initiated his correspondence with Trajan at least ten years later – probably with the intention of

someday publishing some part of the correspondence – he was perhaps prescribing for future Emperors, but more importantly he was substantiating the claims he made in the *Panegyricus* by showing the *princeps* in action. The letters of Book 10 show the Emperor performing the role of *Optimus Princeps* and build on Pliny's foundation of praise laid at the beginning of Trajan's reign.

The Primary Sources

We might wonder what other historians had to say about the reign of the *Optimus Princeps*. Oddly, the sources for Trajan's reign are surprisingly few. Pliny the Younger, Cassius Dio and Dio of Prusa are the only writers whose works survive, and those of Pliny are by far the most influential. Indeed, Pliny's letters to Trajan in Book 10 of the *Epistulae* and the *Panegyricus* he wrote in praise of the Emperor comprise the majority of our direct knowledge about Trajan. Cassius Dio's account is rather short and, while it appears to provide numerous facts about the Emperor, its late date and its effusive praise of the Emperor suggests strong bias. Because Dio was writing almost 100 years after Trajan's reign, we might imagine that he felt less pressure to say the right thing and thus record history as he learned it (presumably with all its disasters and unfortunate events).¹⁰⁵

Since Dio's account of Trajan's reign is completely lacking in negative anecdotes, one might wonder if he was simply buying into the propaganda put forth by Trajan and, to a great extent, Pliny and only recording (and perhaps embellishing) the glorious side of Trajan's reign. Keeping in mind that the possibility that there was nothing negative to say about Trajan is highly unlikely, Dio's completely favorable account is suspect. Therefore, even though Dio was quite far removed from Trajan in time, his probable use of the same biased sources as we possess (Pliny!) resulted in an equally biased account that must be examined with care. Even less useful as a source for Trajan's principate is the work of Dio of Prusa. He did not in fact write a work of history about Trajan's reign or anything

¹⁰⁵ Dio was also likely responding to the fact that, by the time he was writing, Trajan's legend was firmly established.

of the sort; his Orations on Kingship were (probably) addressed to Trajan and seem to reference his reign.¹⁰⁶

Notably absent are the voices of two historians, contemporary with both Trajan and Pliny, and hugely prolific concerning the previous periods: Tacitus and Suetonius. Both sources break off after Domitian's reign and fail to include the comparatively illustrious career of (Nerva and) his successor Trajan. The question remains whether it was a deliberate choice on the part of Tacitus and Suetonius to effectively ignore Trajan or whether other factors affected their respective decisions to leave him out of their histories. If it was a purposeful ellipsis, one has to wonder why Tacitus and Suetonius would choose not to write about the reign of a good Emperor. Wouldn't they have benefited from immortalizing the ruling Emperor with an eminent place in their narratives?

There are several possible explanations for Trajan's absence in both Tacitus' and Suetonius' narratives. While we may never discover the true reason, these possibilities are worth exploring. Beginning with the most benign, the commencement of Tacitus' *History* seems particularly relevant:

mihi Galba Otho Vitellius nec beneficio nec iniuria cogniti. dignitatem nostram a Vespasiano inchoatam, a Tito auctam, a Domitiano longius provectam non abnuerim: sed incorruptam fidem professis neque amore quisquam et sine odio dicendus est. quod si vita suppeditet, principatum divi Nervae et imperium Traiani, uberiolem securiolemque materiam, senectuti seposui, rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ See Dio of Prusa (or Dio Chrysostom) *On Kingship* 1.9,21,33,36; 3.2,12,20,25,55,86. The first oration primarily discusses the importance of caring for one's subjects, and the third focuses on the need to avoid flatterers and find true friends.

¹⁰⁷ Tacitus, *History*, 1.1

I myself knew nothing of Galba, of Otho, or of Vitellius, either from benefits or from injuries. I would not deny that my elevation was begun by Vespasian, augmented by Titus, and still further advanced by Domitian; but those who profess inviolable truthfulness must speak of all without partiality and without hatred. I have reserved as an employment for my old age, should my life be long enough, a subject at once more fruitful and less anxious in the reign of the Divine Nerva and the empire of Trajan, enjoying the rare happiness of times, when we may think what we please, and express what we think.¹⁰⁸

In this passage, Tacitus implies that he would like to include Trajan in his *History* but that he will get to it later, in his old age. Unfortunately, Tacitus offers no explanation for his decision to delay his discussion of Trajan. It is possible that, despite Trajan's good reputation that has been handed down to us by those sources that do survive, Tacitus believed that it was too dangerous to write about an Emperor while he was alive and ruling. While this would seem to contradict his statements in the above passage that he wished to be truthful always and that one might say what one wished during Nerva and Trajan's reigns, the potentially different or more complex reality of the situation must be considered.

For those writers composing their works during the reign of a living Emperor, whether such works were historical or fictional, the Emperor's temperament and goodwill needed to be carefully assessed. Despite claims of the honest and open spirit of an age, authors composing even under the best Emperor, such as Virgil writing under Augustus, had to cater to the imperial will and ideology. Virgil's *Aeneid* is full of references to the shining reign of Augustus. Any criticisms an author wished to insert needed to be heavily veiled at the risk of condemning the writer if revealed. Historians faced an even greater danger, because they (purportedly) reported the truth, the actual sequence of events as

¹⁰⁸ Trans. Loeb.

they happened, thus making any negative comments even more potent. If Suetonius and Tacitus agreed to write during Trajan's reign about his reign, they risked incurring his wrath by touching on potentially sensitive subjects while the Emperor was still alive and (more) liable to take revenge on his critics. Even if Trajan was a purely good and respectable Emperor (as unlikely as this may seem), perhaps the historians viewed the practice as simply against convention to write an historical narrative about the Emperor during his life.

It is tempting simply to assert that Trajan was probably not the absolute *Optimus Princeps* portrayed by Pliny and Cassius Dio, but that no one wished to disclose his flaws because of the potential danger of criticizing a living Emperor. However, without any supporting written evidence for such a claim, we risk employing an *argumentum ex silentio* based on the possibility alone of flaws in Trajan's character (which, consequently, no one ever seems to have recorded). Trajan must have possessed a great many good qualities, as his memory was not condemned the way Domitian's and Nero's were before him. However, many of the Emperors in between, no matter how numerous their good characteristics, were far from perfect: Tiberius turned into a cruel old man, Claudius was a puppet, Nerva was old and susceptible to the Senate's manipulating. It is unusual that the image of an Emperor comes down to us as near to perfect and free from flaws as that of Trajan. This highly-constructed, positive image was therefore most likely the product of Pliny's endeavors to invent the persona of the Emperor, rather than a reflection of reality, whatever the reality actually was.

It is also feasible that Trajan did seem to Tacitus and Suetonius to be a good Emperor, but that they merely wished to weigh in after his reign was finished rather than committing their support to an Emperor who might, like Nero before him, take a turn for the worse later in his career. Such a scenario highlights both the latent risk for contemporary historians such as Tacitus and Suetonius in implicating themselves in the invention of Trajan's image and the complete willingness of Pliny to do so. While Pliny puts all his eggs in one basket and actively supports and praises the Emperor during his lifetime, the two historians (either choose to or are made to) wait until Trajan's illustrious reign comes to an end.¹⁰⁹ Tacitus certainly implies that this is the case in the opening passage of the *History* discussed above, but indeed could not blatantly state his intention (despite the more open and honest spirit of the age) to wait and see before immortalizing Trajan as a hero rather than a villain.

We have no such indications from Suetonius as to why he neglects Trajan in his biographies of the first twelve Caesars, but some speculation is possible. If he had included Trajan (and, presumably, Nerva), he would have been embarking upon a whole new dynasty after the completed reigns of the Julio-Claudian and the Flavian families. If Suetonius began a new dynasty, he might have felt compelled to finish it. However, there was no telling how many rulers would continue Nerva and Trajan's lineage, thus presenting the possibility that Suetonius himself might not be able to finish what he started. Additionally, with Nerva ended not only the Flavian dynasty but the model of

¹⁰⁹ The ephemeral nature of letters, however, would make it relatively easy for Pliny to explain away his support if the need arose. He might argue that letters, unlike history, do not reflect reality and that he was writing what he needed to write to satisfy Trajan (or something along these lines).

familial succession. After Nerva (who adopted Trajan), the Emperor followed the model of adoption, and it was only with Marcus Aurelius that family succession took over once again. Following this explanation, perhaps Suetonius wished to conclude his *Lives of the Caesars* in a logical place, at the end of the Flavian dynasty. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that we lack contemporary historical sources for the reign of Trajan.

This paucity of historical sources seems to have worked to the advantage of Trajan's enduring image. One is hard pressed today to discover a negative word uttered against the Emperor by the ancient sources. In fact, Trajan was quickly commemorated as a good Emperor shortly after his reign when the Senate addressed new Emperor with the hope that they would be *felicior Augusto, melior Traiano* (more blessed/luckier than Augustus and better than Trajan). But why is this the case that Trajan's image remained so pure? We are prompted to consider the possibility that Trajan was not, in fact, the exemplary Emperor Pliny portrays him to be. But even if Trajan truly was the *Optimus Princeps*, the question remains why more sources (especially contemporary ones) did not survive to commemorate his apparently idyllic reign.

The possibility exists that Trajan carefully selected those whom he wished to write of his reign, and closely regulated what they recorded. As it stands, no contemporary historian existed (that we know of) who was either allowed to or wished to write an account of Trajan's principate.¹¹⁰ Given this lack of historical narrative, one wonders why Trajan might have preferred one mode of communication to others. Since

¹¹⁰ We do not, in fact, know of any "biographers" of Trajan or of any relative contemporaries, other than Pliny, who wrote about his reign. Ammianus Marcellinus might have provided a much later (4th century) reflection on Trajan, but, as mentioned below, the beginning of his work (including the section on Trajan) has been lost. We might wonder who Dio Cassius' source(s) was or were, but at this point I can only surmise that his main source was Pliny!

Pliny's letters factor so prominently in the memorialization of Trajan's reign, we might suggest that the letter form as a genre and as a public method of communicating information was being used and explored by Pliny with the intention of creating a certain image of the Emperor (and of himself) that emphasize reciprocity and constructive relationships.

Through Pliny's construction of Trajan's image as an Emperor who had a positive relationship with the Senate and who was effective at dealing with the provinces, Trajan's reign appears relatively blemish-free and irreproachable. Perhaps a historically motivated account of Trajan's reign would have provided a more balanced view and would have included certain mistakes and oversights that characterize any emperor's reign, even those of the "best" Emperors such as Augustus and Marcus Aurelius.¹¹¹ Given the dearth of contemporary historical sources, we might look to such later works as the *Historia Augusta*, our most complete Latin source for the second and third centuries CE, or the history of Ammianus Marcellinus who set out to be the successor to Tacitus.

Unfortunately, the *Historia Augusta* begins with the rule of Hadrian, and the first thirteen books of Ammianus, which commenced with Nerva, are now lost.¹¹² Why, then, can we not utilize Pliny's *Letters* and *Panegyricus* as unproblematic historical sources contemporary with Trajan? First of all, the *Panegyricus*, as discussed above, does not so much record a list of Trajan's deeds but amounts to the manifestation of Pliny's

¹¹¹ In fact, contrary to propaganda, Trajan's policies (and even many of his advisors) were not so different from those of Domitian. For a discussion of the similarities of Domitian's and Trajan's principates, see Waters, K.H. (1969). "Traianus Domitiani Continuator" in *the American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 90, No. 4, 385-405.

¹¹² Even if Ammianus' work had survived completely, he would have had to be read critically since he lived in the late fourth century CE.

ambitions for Trajan during his principate. The long document of praise devotes more attention to a retrospective comparison of Trajan to Domitian than it does to looking forward to Trajan's accomplishments or plans for the future.¹¹³

Pliny's tenth book of *Letters*, however, was a slightly more ambiguous body of work because of the nature of letters discussed above and Pliny's experimentation with the genre. Indeed, Pliny's exploration into the relationship between letter-writing and historiography can be recognized in other letters in his collection, such as long letter he writes to Tacitus concerning the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and his uncle's death.¹¹⁴ Pliny reports the requested information to Tacitus in the form of a letter, but he does so to allow Tacitus to leave an accurate account of it for posterity. He thus frames the information in the more personal (but surely intended to be published) genre of the letter while describing the events exactly as he believes they occurred in narrative fashion. It is worth noting, however, that, in the first letter of Book 1 of the letter collection, Pliny expressly states that he is not writing history¹¹⁵: *Collegi non servato temporis ordine — neque enim historiam componebam -, sed ut quaeque in manus venerat.*¹¹⁶

It must be remembered that the composition of Books 1-10 is still debated, and that perhaps Pliny was attempting to do something different in Book 10 than he was

¹¹³ Panegyric, as a genre, was generally intended to deliver high praise of a person or thing, and was not expected to be critical. Such speeches were often delivered at festivals or games to motivate the citizens to honor and emulate their glorious ancestors. Thus, Pliny's *Panegyricus*, delivered in the Senate in praise of Trajan, was likely not expected to be a historically accurate and representative document.

¹¹⁴ *Ep.* 6.16.

¹¹⁵ The latin word *historia* does not always translate literally as "history" (also account, story). In this context it seems enough to acknowledge that the sense, whether it's meant to refer to a history or an account, remains the same: Pliny asserts that the letters are not meant to report a certain order of events reflecting reality but were randomly collected. Whether or not we believe Pliny is the subject of another paper.

¹¹⁶ *Ep.* 1.1.1.

doing in Books 1-9. Indeed, it is more difficult to recognize any specific order of the letters in Books 1-9, whereas in Book 10 many of the letters written by Pliny are paired with their proper responses by Trajan. Book 10 would thus appear to be more historiographically motivated than Books 1-9, and it is possible that Pliny is conscious of the fact that his collection (namely Book 10) almost fills the gap in the historiographical sources. Because Pliny does seem to exploit this fact in Book 10, we must take it into account when using those letters for historical information. This is partly why I have chosen to read Book 10 not as a reflection of historical events or even of Trajan and Pliny's actual business in Bithynia and Pontus, but rather as Pliny's attempt to portray Trajan as an Emperor who is particularly effective at managing the provinces.

Conclusions

The invention of Trajan's image is not solely carried out by Pliny in Book 10, the *Panegyricus*, or other written texts. This image is also perpetuated by various monuments throughout Rome and Italy. The material record can also function as a powerful indicator of collective memory and, of course, of propagandistic agenda. While we might never be sure of the extent of Trajan's role in constructing his image through Pliny's letters, consideration of monuments commissioned by the Emperor provides different insights into the emperor's possible agenda. When evaluating Trajan's massive forum with its vast porticoes and impressive columnar centerpiece, one is hard pressed not to imagine some sort of propagandistic function behind the incredible size and grandeur of the monumental space. Trajan's column alone delivers such an ideological punch that its spiraling panels are worth considering in the context of the construction of Trajan's image. The subject of the column's frieze, Trajan's Dacian campaigns, provides an effective medium for the Emperor to display his successful conquering of and control over a previously unruly province. The Emperor's success against the Dacians is thus advertised in the middle of Rome on a grandiose scale. While Pliny used the reciprocal, naturalistic nature of letters to invent Trajan's persona in relation to the provinces, the Emperor himself was hard at work fashioning a similar image in the heart of the empire: Rome.

Trajan's Column

Trajan's military engineer and architect Apollodorus designed and built his massive column in the Forum of Trajan as part of a grand and monumental tribute to the

Emperor and his accomplishments, particularly in the Dacian wars of 101-102 and 105-106 CE. The purpose of the column itself has been debated: is it purely a victory monument celebrating Trajan's success or is it also an elaborate tomb for the Emperor?¹¹⁷ Zanker (1970) argues that Trajan boldly designed the column to embody both functions, and that the tomb would be revealed only when he was to be buried there.¹¹⁸ If Trajan's column was indeed intended to become the emperor's tomb, then the circular design of the relief carvings encircling and spiraling up the column might encourage the movement of the viewer as if in a funerary ritual. In this way the architecture would manipulate those viewing the column, helping to "perpetuate Trajan's memory and to enforce reenactment of honorific rituals" while reminding the viewer of Trajan's impressive military career and successes.¹¹⁹ The viewer was compelled not just to observe the column, but to interact with it and participate in an active remembrance and celebration of Trajan's accomplishments.

How did Trajan benefit from the construction of such a monument? The column, along with the entire forum, served to personally commemorate the Emperor and his deeds through impressive architecture.¹²⁰ The many passersby, people of all statuses, professions and persuasions, would have seen the relief carvings of the Dacian Wars, perhaps stopped to admire them, and often probably would have circled the column several times to follow the narrative before continuing on their way. The prominent and

¹¹⁷ To be buried inside the *pomerium* was an honor reserved for the most outstanding and virtuous Republican men, and it would have been quite audacious of Trajan to place his tomb inside the city walls. However, after Domitian enlarged the *pomerium* to enhance his own glory, perhaps Trajan's burial within it would not have created the same negative impression; Davies 48.

¹¹⁸ Davies 48.

¹¹⁹ Davies 58.

¹²⁰ Trajan's forum did in fact dwarf the other imperial fora.

public location of the column certainly added to its effectiveness as a distributor of imperial propaganda and ideology, and the intricately carved reliefs would have reported a powerful narrative of victory and bounty. By portraying images of the Emperor and his men authoritatively subduing the barbarian tribe of the Dacians, the column acts as a visual reminder of Trajan's effective provincial management. The important first step of conquering (or subduing) foreign peoples is represented on the long, spiral frieze, reminding the people that Trajan was an active and often proactive Emperor (whereas certain of his predecessors, namely Nero and Domitian, were not, especially when it came to war; see above).

In addition to the power connoted with military victory, Trajan's column served to articulate another, equally important message about the Emperor and his image: he was the protector and supporter of his empire. He did not provide for his subjects, however, by pillaging the provinces as Domitian did before him. Rather, he embarked upon justified and provoked campaigns against dangerous peoples (like the Dacians) and brought back the honorably won spoils of war.¹²¹ In many respects, therefore, the column paid homage to Trajan the military man, thus providing an interesting contrast with Book 10 of Pliny's *Letters*. While Book 10 does not completely ignore the military glory of the Emperor, it certainly downplays the more militaristic image put forward by monuments such as the column. Trajan's might and power are represented in the letters in Book 10 but in a much more subtle way. He is able to decide the fate of a great number of persons

¹²¹ Davies 62; because Trajan inherited a drained *fiscus* from Domitian, he sought to demonstrate the financial benefits of campaigns. To help achieve this, Trajan decorated the forum with the spoils of war, and the entire complex was built *ex manubiis*.

(for example foundlings, ex-convicts, Christians); he has the authority to sanction building projects on a massive scale; and he commands the loyalty of the provincials as is evidenced in the annual letters Pliny forwards to Trajan. While this type of power is indeed different from the raw power of military supremacy, this sort of dominion is even more important, especially to the Senate. The power of the *civilis princeps* is the authority that is projected by Book 10, constituting a large part of Trajan's character and meriting a great deal of praise from Pliny.

What then, if anything, does Trajan's column imply about his image as the *civilis Princeps*? He certainly could not neglect his military prowess, for this was the base of much of his power. Still, there was more of a balance represented, especially by the column, between his military and civil achievements than is often acknowledged. The reliefs themselves display few scenes of actual battle, and generally portray episodes of travel, construction, *adlocutio*, *submissio* and sacrifice. While these are all aspects of military campaigning, the lack of actual battle scenes may imply that Trajan was attempting to downplay the bloody realities of war in favor of emphasizing the glories, as Davies suggests.¹²² However, the aforementioned activities are not particularly glorious. The troops are generally not shown in triumphant scenes of success and celebrity but rather, as performing quotidian tasks. They are demonstrating the more peaceful and civil side of the army, the side that benefits the community and does not drain its resources without producing a tangible resultant benefit (eg. construction projects). Even though

¹²² Davies 63.

the context of Trajan's column is war, it can be read as a monument to the Emperor's magnificence and management of the day-to-day running of the empire.

After considering the motifs represented by Trajan's column and contrasting (and comparing) them to the themes set forth by Pliny in Book 10 of his *Letters*, it becomes clear that the invention and fashioning of an image of the *Princeps* was a complex, multi-faceted process. While Trajan's literary legacy is primarily composed of Pliny's works, and while Pliny appears to have had his own agenda in inventing Trajan, physical monuments such as Trajan's column were built to memorialize and publicize an aspect of the Emperor's reign for public consumption as well. However, Pliny and Trajan possessed different aims in their construction of Trajan's image. Trajan's letter exchange with Pliny demonstrates the emperor's effective management of the provinces through his (Trajan's) own initiative and through a very productive relationship with Pliny, a high-ranking senator. Pliny provides examples of the Emperor's compassion, thoroughness, diligence and decisiveness, but all with the aim of creating a larger picture of Trajan's relationship to his subjects, his provinces, and his senators.

Although Trajan most certainly was amenable to this portrayal of himself, he made different choices in the impressive stone monuments he left behind. In his column especially, we can see both the strongly militaristic image of the Emperor and his enriching and successful campaigns against the Dacians, but also a tentative attempt to balance such an image with more peaceful and civic depictions. The Emperor probably recognized the need to maintain a strong military image despite the discomfort it might have caused the Senate. Trajan was not completely unmindful of his expected role of

civilis princeps, however, even in the imagery on his column and victory monument.

Whatever the column and the forum were not able to accomplish in the way of balance and communication of a more peaceful image of the Emperor, was fulfilled through the public circulation of Pliny's tenth book of *Letters*.

Thus, even though the images put forth by the correspondence with Pliny and the imagery on Trajan's column may appear to conflict with one another, perhaps we should see these two sources as complementary to one another, and working in tandem to create a well rounded and impressive portrait of an *Optimus Princeps* who fulfilled all his necessary functions with the utmost skill and care. As we consider whether this image that Pliny has created of Trajan is believable or whether it is more a perpetuation of a personal mythology of the author, it is important to remember that this glowing image of Trajan is what we now possess. Reading our sources (or in this case, our one primary source) critically and meticulously is always necessary, and it is fairly clear that Pliny's *Letters* require just such careful attention. Through this letter exchange with Pliny, Trajan emerges as the *Optimus Civilis Princeps* who maintains a positive working relationship with the Senate while taking care of his subjects in the provinces.

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