

# Pliny's Province<sup>1</sup>

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Modern historians who specialise in the Roman provinces have a bad habit of treating ancient authors as if they are research assistants. For the southern shores of the Black Sea, Strabon and Arrian act as travel writers, with some local knowledge; Dion of Prusa provides vignettes of civic institutions; Lucian provides some racey anecdotes, and Pliny the Younger is deputed to compile an administrative archive that will offer an imperial perspective on local government. Once this mass of testimony has been assembled, and seasoned with choice inscriptions and a few monuments, historians typically lament the absence of witnesses they could not recruit – women, slaves, Scythians, merchants, peasants and so on. The objections to this procedure are well known, if often forgotten. No list of witnesses could ever be comprehensive. Worse, more information does not always lead to greater understanding (as our modernist colleagues, deluged with evidence as they are, remind us). Worst of all, our “witnesses” are not colleagues, their texts are not responses to our research questions, and at least some apparent resemblances between their texts and the products of modern scientific research are profoundly misleading.

This chapter is not intended to be simply a reminder of these points, illustrated through discussion of book 10 of Pliny the Younger's *Letters*. But the state of the secondary literature does mean that it is necessary to begin by showing that this text is not an administrative archive, that its arrangement is shaped by rhetorical and panegyric ends, that it does not provide a normative model for relations or correspondence between a typical emperor and a typical governor (if such things existed); and that modern attempts to use Pliny's *Letters* as a more or less straightforward guide to the *metier* of a Roman governor are unconvincing and misconceived. Making these points will be the function of section 1.

But in the rest of this paper, I shall ask what sort of Black Sea province Pliny presented to his audience back home in Rome? What did he include and emphasize? What was omitted? How far does that distinction reflect a difference between the province he saw and the province that remained unseen by him? And how far is it the product of ideology, or of design? In interpreting the partialities of this text I will not be arguing that it is fictional, at least not in

any everyday sense. The credibility of Pliny's account of Bithynia and Pontus has been spared the sceptical interrogation lavished on Herodotos' account of the Black Sea.<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship has also largely rejected the extreme versions of that scepticism and also the parallel thesis that Ovid never set foot in Tomis.<sup>3</sup> It is not entirely clear why suspicion surrounds these ancient accounts of the Black Sea region, in a way that it does not similar accounts of western provinces. Had the Euxine – however long it had been known, colonized and navigated – somehow acquired a particularly alien connotation in classical literature, rather like the wildness of the American Wild West? But Pliny's Black Sea will emerge as domesticated as Ovid's is wild, while Pliny's *Letters* from Pontus express a contented proximity to the imperial court that contrasts strikingly with the tortured distance evoked by Ovid's last compositions. None of this, I suggest, is by chance. The difference is only partly a matter of genre, prose rather than poetry, letters rather than inquiries. Ovid had made *Letters* into a vehicle for fantastic mythopoeics and Apuleius did the same in his prose evocations of Roman Greece. The selection of a genre is in any case a compositional technique, so no kind of explanation for the particularity of any text. If Pliny's *Letters* are presented in terse and unadorned prose, clothed in factuality rather than in an air of the fantastic and the unreal, that is his deliberate choice.

I emphasise choice and composition for another reason. Naïve readings of Pliny have often treated his work as in effect real correspondence, lightly polished perhaps, but in general usable as if it were documentary. Yet an appreciation of its textuality might lead to an opposite extreme, currently rather fashionable in readings of other texts of the early empire, in which they are read mainly for traces of empire, as exemplars of an imperial gaze or commentaries, intentional or otherwise, on their imperial situation. I shall argue that Pliny's province is ideologically laden, in the sense that it reflects interested beliefs shared among the Latin-reading and province-governing elite around the imperial court. But those beliefs can be distinguished from the very deliberate rhetorical aims of this particular text and this author. My ambition, then, is to pilot Pliny into the Euxine on his own Argosy between the Kyanean Rocks of naïve literalism and of schematic post-colonialist readings, and bring him home with a Golden Fleece of *Realien* about Roman government and the southern shores of the Black Sea.

### *The nature of book 10*

The common assessment of book 10 of Pliny's *Letters* remains a version of that presented by Sherwin-White in his monumental commentary.<sup>4</sup> Sherwin-White was convinced of their "authenticity as correspondence" by the undoubted historicity of the correspondents and especially by the mass of precise and particular details. He considered that the letters were "highly polished", that Pliny wrote "under strong literary influence", that some letters had been

“elaborated” and that as a whole “the letters have developed from genuine letters, and within limits Pliny is faithful to the principle of authenticity”. Some of the more mundane letters could, according to Sherwin-White

be checked by comparison with certain of the letters to Trajan, which like the rest of book 10 show no sign of literary revision, and have never been regarded as other than genuine letters.<sup>5</sup>

Sherwin-White's view of the nature of books 1-9 was never completely accepted. Indeed, his project of writing an historical, social and economic commentary that dealt with as little literary matter as possible ran counter to some other trends in Plinian scholarship.<sup>6</sup> He was certainly correct to note that signs of literary art and even direct references to other texts are to be expected in the most private correspondence between aristocrats steeped in literary culture. Yet the argument for authenticity from the impression of verisimilitude conjured up by a mass of convincing detail is a weak one: it would apply equally to Apuleius or even Dickens. Nor is the historicity of addressees a powerful argument, given that much Latin epistolography had, at least since Cicero, adopted the convention of addressing real individuals. Sherwin-White's view seems in many cases to rest on a subjective reading, a profession to have been persuaded.<sup>7</sup> Yet Pliny, as an accomplished orator, was a master of persuasion.

More recently a mass of scholarship has offered a cumulative re-evaluation of the *Letters* as literature<sup>8</sup>. Most situate them firmly in the contexts of didactic epistolography and stress intertextual and other relationships with Ciceronian models and also with contemporary works such as Tacitus' *Dialogus de oratoribus* and Quintilian's *Institutes* as well as with Pliny's *Panegyricus*. There is a new appreciation of the subtlety of Pliny's self-representation, the artfulness with which his ethical, aesthetic and political agenda is advanced, and in particular the care with which addressees were selected, letters edited, and their arrangement within each book devised. Pliny's self-exemplification like his fascination with memorialising the lives of himself and others (and with condemning the unworthy to oblivion) offers new didactic possibilities in letters that overtly disclaim philosophical or literary pretensions. As a result it is increasingly difficult to read Pliny's *Letters* as an unselfconscious document of aristocratic life that offers unmediated contact with the thought world of Pliny and his peers. These studies have, however, been focused almost entirely on the first nine books of the *Letters* as were the more literary approaches to Pliny's *Letters* criticised by Sherwin-White. He was quite correct to write that the tenth book had usually been regarded as quite different in kind.

The tradition of treating book 10 as different is an old one, and one based on genuine differences. Pliny's letters in book 10, unlike the others, have a single addressee, it is the only one to include exchanges between Pliny and his correspondent (Trajan), the book shows some stylistic differences from

the others,<sup>9</sup> and much (but not all) of it concerns events that take place far from the City of Rome, and the rather sunny world of Trajanic Italy. There are also some differences in the transmission of book 10, although these are less clear-cut than sometimes represented.<sup>10</sup> Wynne Williams' excellent 1990 commentary on most of book 10<sup>11</sup> – he excludes letters 1-14 that precede Pliny's governorship – presents essentially the same view as Sherwin-White. Books 1-9 (and the first 14 letters of book 10) are "private", "personal" prepared for publication by Pliny and are somewhat polished and selected for literary aims. The rest of book 10 are "public" letters, and are taken to be very much as he composed them. Williams accurately summarised the *communis opinio* when he writes that

It is usually assumed that Pliny died suddenly in BP soon after writing 10.120, and that book 10 must have been collected and published by someone else ('an editor') in an unrevised form.<sup>12</sup>

This assumption is in fact a conjecture of Sherwin-White's based on the fact that our epigraphic evidence for Pliny's career shows no offices certainly later than his governorship, and that the book has seemed to many to break off sharply. Along with these views go the following: that the order of the letters to Trajan roughly preserves the order of composition; that although some responses are missing there are no major gaps in the sequence; and that the letters are unpolished, either by Pliny or his postulated literary executor. Combining all these views we arrive at the modern position, which treats the letters from Bithynia-Pontus as *essentially equivalent to an archive of the total correspondence between one governor and the emperor*.

It would be wonderful if this were true. But there are many objections. First, as has always been realised, the unity of the tenth book depends not on the period of composition, nor on the subject matter of governing a province, but on the fact that it deals with Pliny's epistolary relations with Trajan. In fact, the first fourteen letters of book 10 form a careful and appropriate introduction of this theme, beginning with congratulations to Trajan on his accession, going on to establish Pliny's debt to Trajan (and status as a client), asserting the personal interest that Trajan has taken in Pliny from the very beginning of his most fortunate principate, and providing a resumé of Pliny's career presented as a series of *beneficia* depending on Trajan. Trajanic propaganda motifs like *indulgentia*, and themes such as respect for the senate and the dawning of a new age, also appear. When Trajan first responds he begins by praising Pliny for doing his duty as a *civis* and a *senator*. More *beneficia* follow in letters 5 through 7 and are answered in 8 with the first appearance of imperial cult, a *Leitmotiv* of the tenth book as of the *Panegyricus*. The last pre-Bithynian letter congratulates Trajan on his recent victory, and ends with a prayer that the glory of the empire might be renewed and expanded by Trajan's great virtues.

It will be apparent now that there is a case to be made for at least the be-

ginning of book 10 being treated as just as carefully composed as books 1-9. How plausible is it that an editor or literary executor made this arrangement after Pliny's death? If he did not, how plausible is the argument that book 10 is effectively a file of letters published as they were found? Other objections can be made to reading the remaining letters in this way. If they were really not intended for publication, why are they so easily comprehensible (by contrast with Cicero's actual correspondence from Cilicia which, like most real letters, presumes a good deal of shared information between correspondents)? Like the letters in book 9 and unlike Cicero's private correspondence, each letter in book 10 has a unity of theme. And how do we explain the ordering, and the fact that no replies refer to more than one subject, given the journey time between Bithynia-Pontus and Rome? Why do Trajan and Pliny always emerge so well from the correspondence if it was not written for a public eye? And why do the letters, when gathered together as they are, create such a well-rounded narrative?

My answer, of course, is that book 10 is much more similar to the other books than has been acknowledged, that its relationship to actual correspondence is just as remote and that we are (still) dealing with issues of self-representation. The difference is that Pliny has worked a new variation on what was an apparently successful epistolary formula, adapting it so that it no longer models a set of idealised moral, literary and political transactions within the Roman imperial elite, but instead models the proper relationship between "the ideal emperor and the ideal senator".<sup>13</sup> It is an idealised relationship of course, one where the senator forever defers and the princeps forever concedes, one articulated by unequal exchanges, but exchanges conducted within the elaborate language of patronage. Pliny's text elaborates an ideology of active participation, portraying a partnership that works in the interest of the provincials and the empire. Like the positions created in books 1-9 we can understand Pliny's concerns as both immediate and topical on the one hand – well suited to the circumstances of Trajan's principate and the aftermath of Domitian's – and on the other hand generalisable, contributing like all imperial panegyric to a blue-print for good government as the senate saw it. The inclusion of Trajan's responses gives it the quality of a dialogue. Perhaps this is not so surprising given the role of dialogue in the philosophical writing of Pliny's admired Cicero, and one effect is to dramatise their relations, rather like the tense exchanges between emperors and senators in Tacitus' *Annals*. Except that in the *Letters* we are in a world of ideals, where imperial and aristocratic virtues form easy alliances rather than come into inevitable conflict, and for most of the book we are far from the claustrophobic politics of Rome.

### *A very Roman province*

Let us begin with the question of audience. Perhaps the most obvious intended first readers were those for whom the first nine books of *Letters* 1-9 were

written. It seems reasonable to imagine that this group included, but was not limited to, the addressees. Of these there were just over a hundred, nearly half of them senators, the rest *equites* or members of municipal aristocracies (especially those from the Italian Lakes area where Pliny himself originated), almost all male, and almost all from Italy rather than the provinces.<sup>14</sup> Beyond this group, we might envisage readers of similar class and background, and perhaps also a slightly broader social group since the *Letters* stand out in the Latin literature of the period for their accessibility and the absence of esoteric allusions and the other markers of a literary culture of exclusion.<sup>15</sup> Educated along the lines advocated by Quintilian, Pliny's readers had learned Roman imperialism from Virgil and Latin prose from Cicero. Among them, those of higher status knew something of provincial government from personal experience, since military service remained a rite of passage for the young males of equestrian and senatorial status. A few were former governors, legates of various sorts or procurators. Others aspired to those positions.

Yet very few of Pliny's readers were likely to have expert knowledge of the Roman Black Sea, and they approached Pliny's tenth book without the modern aids we take for granted: commentaries, atlases, prosopographical reference works, synopses of Hellenistic history, a great nineteenth and twentieth century literature on "provincial administration" and the like. And because they approached it with expectations drawn from the first nine books they were in for some surprises. I have already described how the book introduces its theme, Pliny and Trajan, from the *initia felicissimi principatus*. Achronicity is immediately flagged, for book ten has more or less the same chronological starting point as book one. Instead of a sequel we are offered a parallel supplement, rather like the second and third volumes of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* which retell the events of the first novella from the different perspectives offered by other characters. As the reader gets to know the protagonists of book 10, he or she receives a *frisson* of excitement when for the first time in all the *Letters* Pliny becomes the recipient of a letter, and one from the *optimus princeps* of all people! Pliny's glorious career appears anew. The distant emperor of the first nine books comes sharply into focus. The elaborate patron-client relations that pervade the first nine books are at last completed with the appearance of the ultimate patron, now for the first time revealed as the font of much of Pliny's bounty. Pliny, that is, in the presence of Trajan presents himself as broker more than patron.<sup>16</sup> Then, with letter 15, we suddenly find Pliny heading eastwards, rounding Cape Malea and crossing the Aegean to Ephesos *en route* for an as yet unnamed province, revealed only in letter seventeen as Bithynia. Note the lack of precision in the provincial title: Pliny hardly mentions Pontus in his letters and often refers to the province as Bithynia and its inhabitants as Bithynians. More on this anon.

The *Letters* as a whole are all about self-presentation. Pliny portrays himself throughout book ten as energetic, loyal and eager. Gone is the reflective



aristocrat musing on the virtues of scholarly *otium*, elegantly balancing his social obligations with his literary aspirations, or else writing mischievous reproaches to his peers. In letter 16 Pliny is making haste, already hard at work on the finances of Prusa, despite the fact that he claims to be writing immediately on his arrival. The next two letters (17 and 18) introduce the main themes of the book, the loyalty of the provincials, the foresight of the emperor, the diligence of the governor and the energy expended by both for the benefit of the provincials. Their gratitude, when it appears next, is precisely an expression of the gift-exchange between rulers and ruled which Simon Price has made the key to understanding the imperial cult.<sup>17</sup> Note too that in Trajan's response in letter 17, he finds time to advertise his great building projects in Rome. The next exchange addresses the perennial hot potato of the role of soldiers in peaceful provinces. Pliny and Trajan concur in preferring to use civilians where possible, Pliny faithfully transmits the message to the *praefectus* of the *ora Pontica*, Trajan approves his action and backs him up, ending the correspondence with the *sententia* that "Public interest should always be the priority and soldiers should be removed from their units as rarely as possible" (10.20).

But I will not go on here to offer a reading of each exchange as it arises, although the way the character of imperial rule is revealed through successive elaborations on the basic themes is indeed interesting. Not only does it offer a quasi-narrative of Pliny's first year in office but it also conforms to a principle well established in the first nine books of the *Letters*, that of *varietas* – varying the subject matter frequently in an apparently random fashion, one which conceals some significant juxtapositions. As in the other books, there are also intratexts that establish a thematic unity for the Tenth Book, and give it some direction.

Instead, I want to pick out a few of the ways Pliny's text Romanises Bithynia-Pontus. For a start there are many continuities with some of the ethical and political preoccupations of *Letters* 1-9 and with those of the *Panegyricus* too.

All ten books are preoccupied with the proper ordering of society, and the emperor is the ultimate guarantor of that order. Most important to Pliny and his readers are the relations between members of the imperial elite, and the political roles appropriate to them under the principate. Throughout the *Letters* – none of which were written under Domitian or Nerva – Trajan's reign is portrayed as a period of prosperity and calm, of urban munificence and social justice. Bithynia, in all these respects, is an extension into the provinces of Pliny's analysis of Rome and Italy. The senatorial, equestrian and municipal elites of the peninsula are revealed to be only some of the beneficiaries of the new age, and they are partners in rolling out Trajanic order. One key theme that becomes prominent from letter 56 onwards and which also points back to preoccupations of *Letters* 1-9, is the relationship of Pliny and Trajan's rule to past decisions, especially those of Pliny's predecessors as governor (in the trials of two of whom Pliny had been involved<sup>18</sup>) and Trajan's as emperor.

Naturally some of the matters were genuinely important, especially given the authority often accorded to precedent both in general and explicitly by Pliny and Trajan in this book. But there is also a connection with a key concern of the first three books of Pliny's *Letters*: how far does Trajan's break with the Domitianic past go? Will there be new trials of former delators? Are all Domitianic precedents automatically abrogated? And what will happen to those who did well under Domitian? Revisited in Pliny's tenth book, these issues lead the correspondents back through the governorships of Julius Bassus, Julius Calvus, to Velius Paulus and the principates of Nerva and Domitian. Perhaps the interest in Pompey's Law is the natural culmination of this process, since Pompey provides Pliny's Province with its Year Zero. Epigraphic evidence and the odd literary text makes clear that Hellenistic arbitrations and claims based on early historical, mythical and poetical authorities were common.<sup>19</sup> Yet Pliny's Bithynia is entirely a Roman artefact, and its social order utterly Roman.

Then again, consider the places and people mentioned in the course of the *Letters*. By letter 22 only one location within the province has been mentioned – Prusa – and only one individual, Gavius Bassus, the prefect of the Pontic Shore. The next individual named is another member of the Roman administration, the *legatus* Servilius Pudens whose arrival at the city of Nikomedeia is reported in letter 25. Letter 26 is a testimonial for a senatorial protégé, Rosianus Geminus and is unrelated to the affairs of the province. This is a good reminder for us of how shaky is the distinction between book 10 and the rest of Pliny's *Letters*, but for a Roman reader perhaps a sign that Pliny's geographical remoteness does not make him neglect his *officia* within the Roman elite. Geminus is also a cadre of similar rank to Bassus, and both are in fact veterans of Trajan's wars. Letter 27 introduces an imperial freedman Maximus, a procurator *en route* to fetch corn from Paphlagonia, a group of *beneficarii* and Maximus' superior, a more senior procurator Gemellinus. Letter 29 presents Sempronius, a junior officer, removing slaves from his recruits. Plinian *varietas* is at work. Alongside the parade of energetic Roman officials we observe in both incidents Trajan's and Pliny's insistence that slaves and ex-slaves be kept in their proper place. Tyrants, notoriously, failed to respect the order of things, giving slaves and freedmen power and precedence over free and freeborn. That theme, which evokes a trope of Domitianic and Claudian tyranny mentioned elsewhere in the Plinian corpus,<sup>20</sup> is prolonged in letters 31 to 33 which concern the proper treatment of men once sentenced to hard labour or the arena whom Pliny discovers are doing the job of public slaves in Nikaia and Nikomedeia.

At this point, the only cities to have been mentioned are Prusa, Nikomedeia and Nikaia, the great centres of the Hellenistic kingdom of Bithynia. There is a real contrast here with the listing of exotic Pontic toponyms and ethnonyms in Arrian's *Periplus* written in the next reign, with its constant reference to Xenophon's march into the unknown, and to peoples like the Colchians fa-



miliar from myth. Those myths had been made popular by numerous Greek and Latin *Argonautica* poems and tragedies on the theme of Medea, some of them composed in Flavian Rome by Pliny's aristocratic peers. Lucian's *Alexander*, set largely in Pontus, also makes a good deal of its remoteness and the superstition of the Paphlagonians who inhabit the hinterland of Abonouteichos. Yet Pliny's province of Greek cities remains the focus of his attention throughout the tenth book. Other cities do eventually appear. Klaudiopolis, formerly Bithynium, in letter 43, then Byzantium, and Apameia in 47-48, both in the context of the inspection of their finances. But we remain mostly in old cities of the Bithynian west. Pontic cities appear in letter 75 where a Pontic benefactor leaves money to Herakleia and Tios, in 90 and 91 on the water supply of Sinope and in 92-93 on the autonomy of Amisos. A series of letters looking back to Pompey's *lex provinciae* appear in the sequence 108-112, but Bithynia soon reappears as shorthand for Bithynia-and-Pontus. Nor do a mass of individuals whose names immediately declare them provincials appear in subsequent letters. A few grandees from the great Bithynian cities, mostly Roman citizens, have walk-on parts: Flavius Archippos, Claudius Eumolpus, Dion Cocceianus, Claudius Polyaeus. But Pliny's main concern remains with the Romans in his province.

It is not new, of course, to point out that Pliny offers a partial account of Bithynia-Pontus. There is less agreement on the reasons for this partiality. For those who see the correspondence as a more or less faithful record of the preoccupations of Pliny the governor, this partiality reflects his experience.<sup>21</sup> More generally, the focus on the cities of the Bithynian west has been used to support the speculative thesis that Pliny was sent out with special financial responsibilities because of crises in the Bithynian cities, and in this respect differed from "normal" governors. This hypothesis is not really testable, given the absence of external evidence for Pliny's activities as governor and the paucity of comparanda from other governors' careers. The letters that do refer to Pliny checking civic finances sit alongside letters on many other matters: he was also especially concerned with building, with the role of the military, and also with the proper observance of cult. Yet Pliny's focus on the Bithynian west may well give a realistic impression of the priorities of the province's governors, whether it represents a detailed log of his actual experience or is simply a plausible representation of it. The location of *conventus* (assize) centres in many provinces – among them Baetica, Cyrenaica, Egypt and Asia – makes it clear that governors did spend most of the time in the more urbanised portions of their provinces. Bithynia had about twice as many cities as Pontus, and the largest were far more populous.<sup>22</sup> Pontus and Paphlagonia had many analogues elsewhere in the empire as vast underdeveloped internal hinterlands, areas from which men, timber and grain might be extracted, but where Roman government was otherwise far from intrusive. And as in modern colonial situations, the grandest local elites must have drawn attention and energy to themselves through their greater politi-

cal prominence and better access to governmental circles. The list of known equestrians attested from the province includes 18 from Bithynia but only 6 from Pontus.<sup>23</sup> The list of senators certainly from the province includes 14 from Bithynia, among them the historians Arrian and Dion Cassius, but only 3 from Pontic cities.<sup>24</sup>

So before convicting Pliny of deliberately turning a blind eye, we much take account of the real limitations of the gubernatorial gaze. Governors saw cities rather than villages because they spent most time in cities, and the journeys they made around their provinces were along major rather than minor roads, along the coastal plains (or even by sea) rather than through the wooded uplands of districts like northern Anatolia. Governors knew Romans by name since they depended so heavily on their subordinates, slaves and ex-slaves to bring information and implement their decisions. By the same token, the provincials they knew best were prominent male members of urban elites, perhaps especially that growing group who spoke Latin as well as Greek. Perhaps too the largely supervisory role of the Roman governor drew their attention to wealth and power, since it was conflicts over civic finances and tensions between the super-wealthy and other members of civic élites that were most likely to disturb the Roman government.

Yet the very tranquillity of Pliny's governorship arouses suspicions. One of the achievements of the new Plinian scholarship is the demonstration of how closely Pliny established Cicero as a model for his own life and literary production.<sup>25</sup> Pliny's letters are not very like the rather unpolished letters Cicero sent back from Cilicia. One major contrast is between the high degree of closure and unity of theme evident in each exchange between Trajan and Pliny, compared to Cicero's letters which often treat several issues, and frequently leave them unresolved. Perhaps a Roman reader comparing the two might note more dysfunction in Cicero's account, and more emphasis on the clash of interests between different Romans in the province, between metropolitan interests and local concerns, and even the way the provincials seemed often to lose out. Tacitus' famous negative verdict (*Ann.* 1.2) on provincial government under the Republic shows that at least some senators of Pliny's day were well aware of the failings of that system. Pliny's epistolary account of provincial government is utterly opposite in its emphasis. Emperor and senator work together, supported by an excellent cast of smaller players, and the provincials are enriched, protected and cherished by the co-operative efforts of their rulers.

Pliny had perhaps a better Ciceronian model in the rather more idealised letter to Quintus which in effect describes the virtues of a governor<sup>26</sup>. Pliny had already essayed a short version of this in his much discussed letter to Maximus en route to govern the free cities of Achaëa (8.22). That letter picks up a number of Ciceronian themes – the Greeks as authors of *humanitas*, their decayed present state, the good treatment owed to them on this account and the obligation on a governor to live up to his own virtues and so on. Much of book ten is an

exemplification of these themes, but it also generalises them so they may be applied to any province. The Greekness of the Bithynians is hardly alluded to. Trajan at one point (10.40) opines *gymnasiis indulgent Graeculi* and a few Greek institutions are mentioned in passing – *threptoï* (65) and *eranoï* (92) – but in general the specificity of the Bithynians' situation is played down.

We might even see Pliny as contributing to a long running discourse on the virtues and role of a governor, one in which the legal innovations of Scaevola, Cicero's letter to his brother, Tacitus' *Agricola* and Ulpian's *On the Office of Proconsul* might all be inserted. It is hardly a surprise that this was a source of anxiety,<sup>27</sup> given the general interest of Roman aristocrats in the ethical basis of their conduct; given the stimulus provided by Stoicism to examine the virtues appropriate to one's role in life; and given the relatively large proportion of the senatorial and equestrian elite who at one point or another in their careers would find themselves serving the emperor in the provinces in one capacity or another. At least one commonplace of these texts was the great variety of functions a governor might be called on to perform. The epistolary format offered Pliny the means of presenting his *officium* as a montage of images: the governor concerned about foundlings, the governor dealing with religious conflict, the governor coming to the rescue of the burning city, the governor receiving envoys from friendly kings beyond the province, the governor officiating in the imperial cult and so on.

Even so, it is striking what is absent from this *montage*, missing images which we can supply from Cicero's Cilician letters and from numerous anecdotes in historical texts. The governor at loggerheads with his procurator, the civic squabbles that cannot be resolved because the truth is obscure or the protagonists too well connected in Rome, the Roman troublemakers whose connections in the capital make them invulnerable to gubernatorial regulation, the governor accused of peculation or cruelty, the governor embarrassed by the behaviour of his family and entourage, the atrocities perpetrated in remote hinterlands by soldiers, publicans or imperial freedmen... who must nevertheless be supported in the name of Rome.<sup>28</sup> These omissions were not invisible to the gubernatorial gaze, indeed they were all too obvious to it. It is inconceivable that none of these issues arose during Pliny's governorship. His decision to mention no problems that could not be resolved at once must have been deliberate. This partiality strengthens the impression that the ethical themes common to *Letters* 1-9 and the tenth book are not simply the product of a single mind writing on two different themes. Pliny's province has been carefully constructed and carefully edited, and book ten of the *Letters* is not a collection of confidential despatches from the Euxine front. It is an artfully constructed image of the good aristocrat in his province, and of the best of emperors in Rome.

*Pliny and Black Sea Studies*

What are the implications of these arguments for the study of Roman government on the southern shores of the Black Sea? Clearly we have to abandon the modern fantasy that these letters are as good as a papyrological archive, a precious chance to look over the shoulder of a governor at work. But the tenth book of *Letters* does offer us glimpses of the ideology of Roman government, of the immediate context of Pliny's epistolary project, and perhaps too of the view of Pontos from Rome.

First then, Pliny's text certainly reflects the attitudes and ideologies of his class. Perhaps most striking is how easily the ethics of provincial government could be presented as simply an extension of the domestic virtues of the aristocrat. Like all colonial administrators in every empire, Roman governors brought preconceptions and habits of mind with them to the provinces. But Roman administrators never spent as long in their stations as did those of nineteenth-century empires. Their rapid circulation back to the centre was more analogous to that of modern diplomats, who rarely stay in post long enough to lose their institutional and national viewpoint, and spend much of their time abroad closeted with compatriots and fellow diplomats. Diplomats today, as a result, rarely "go native" in the way some colonial administrators were believed to in modern British and French empires. Roman administrators, too, seem neither to have adopted local customs and tastes, nor to have developed any special identity like those created in the colonial services of the bureaucratic empires created by European nation-states. Pliny is as Roman in Bithynia-Pontus as he is in Rome or Comum... or at least knows how to convey that impression.

The limits of using book ten of the *Letters* to explore a gubernatorial ideology are set by the extent to which Pliny's governorship is the product of careful rhetorical design. Both his Ciceronianism and his careful partiality would have been noticed and appreciated by his most obvious first readers. There is no question of these *Letters* serving a propagandistic function. Very few in the Greek world would read them. The Roman élite themselves were well aware from their experience as well as their reading of quite how messy provincial government might be on the ground, quite what awkward moral compromises governors had to make, quite how difficult it was to deal with certain difficulties. As with *Letters* books 1-9, Pliny offered a beguiling and reassuring idealisation that may have comforted some readers and amused others. Imperial ideology often offers rulers a beguiling and reassuring view of their roles. But for some readers, it was perhaps effective mostly as a cunning variation on the epistolary conventions established in the first nine books, and as yet another deft reworking of Ciceronian themes.

More serious perhaps was the panegyric intent of the *Letters*, the proclamation that Trajan so exercised his *officium* as emperor that it made it possible, even easy, for an aristocrat to govern his province virtuously. Pliny's

epistolary dialogue is a complement to Tacitus' near contemporary exploration in the *Agricola* of the limits set on gubernatorial virtue by a tyrant in Rome. At the time of its likely publication it also contributed to the topical needs of Trajan's regime to establish itself as a new start, as un-Domitianic and as a partnership with enlightened members of the senate<sup>29</sup>.

And Pontos itself? Pliny could certainly have written up his time in Bithynia-Pontus in other ways. Strabon, Ovid, Lucian offer contrasting views in which the particularity of the Black Sea World and the exoticism of some of its more marginal regions is stressed or exploited. Roman readers would have known, whether they had visited the Euxine or not, that there was always local colour. Lucian has a Roman governor among those who visited the oracular shrine of Glycon at Pontic Abonouteichos.<sup>30</sup> An interest in local cults was not uncommon for Roman governors: several governors of Macedonia were initiated at Samothrake and others at Eleusis. Tourist visits to the Pyramids in Egypt by prefects and members of the imperial family are well attested. There are many anecdotes involving governors in Philostratos' *Lives of the Sophists*. Pliny the Elder lists many Roman officials who became interested in local fish stocks or geography or collected art-works. And a great and largely unrecorded crowd of governors presumably spent their time dining, hunting and intriguing with the locals. It is no surprise that Pliny presents his gubernatorial self as a workaholic, or rather that the varieties of *otium* that featured in his other letters are almost absent from book 10. Like other governors, he often appears like a miniature version of one idealisation of the emperor working long hours, receiving petitions, adjudicating conflicts and often on the move.

But Pliny does more than efface his leisure from his account of his governor's life. The province itself is made characterless. No forests and wild shores, no historic sites or crumbling temples, no strange uncivilised peoples appear. Arrian's view of the Euxine coast is completely different, much more like the colour with which Tacitus renders *Agricola's* province untamed and unknown. Bithynia-Pontus is domesticated, in deference to the completeness of Roman and Trajanic success (unlike the incompleteness of Domitianic Britain). But it is also generalised. I have suggested already that this contributes to Pliny's didactic aim, to the exemplary role he has chosen for himself. Pliny might be any governor, his subjects any group of provincials. Perhaps too it reflects an ideology of provincial rule as the application of general virtues, rather than the work of knowledgeable specialists. But it also expresses an often unremarked feature of Roman engagement with their empire, one that distinguishes Roman imperial culture from that of more modern empires.<sup>31</sup> The experience of modern empire reflects a fascination with the exotic, a desire to engage with the strangeness of foreign lands that took sexual, gastronomic, aesthetic, poetic, architectural, scientific and even mystical forms. Romans seem to have had none of this appetite for the alien. Britain, Africa or Germany might be exoticised, but in formulaic and schematic ways for



immediate rhetorical effect, not as an attempt to capture the authentic difference of the alien. Pliny's province too was merely a canvas, one that might be rendered schematically domesticated or wild according to need. But it posed no imaginative challenge for him, in the way that mapping the virtue of an imperial aristocracy evidently did.

## Notes

- 1 This paper is much improved by the kind, encouraging and critical comments of other participants in the conference held at Esbjerg in January 2005 and by those of Roy Gibson, Dominic Rathbone and of course Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen. All have saved me from many errors and some exaggeration. Section 1 on the nature of book 10 of Pliny's *Letters* summarises arguments presented to the audience of the Walsh Lecture at the University of Chicago in 2005 which will be published more fully elsewhere. My thanks to that audience too.
- 2 For the modern debate since Armayor 1978, see Hartog 1988, Fehling 1989, Pritchett 1993 and most helpfully Cartledge and Greenwood 2002.
- 3 For a succinct statement and elegant analysis see Williams 1994, 3-49 with interesting comments on the air of unreality with which Ovid's exile poetry cloaks Tomis.
- 4 Sherwin-White 1966, 11-20. Sherwin-White's decision to mount a defence of "The Authenticity of the *Letters* as Correspondance" recognised a range of different views on the letters current at the time of the composition of his commentary. His magisterial Commentary's influence has survived a hostile reception exemplified by Jones 1968, as well as more appreciative reviews like that of Veyne 1967.
- 5 Sherwin-White 1966, 12.
- 6 E.g. Guillemin 1929, Butler 1970.
- 7 Lilja 1970 also argues for the "reality" of the "private" letters in books 1-9 but also challenges the legitimacy of the distinction between "real" and "literary" letters and gathers a mass of evidence that shows Pliny's awareness of the stylistic conventions of epistolography. She seems to me to place undue emphasis on the lack of explicit discussion of publication or performance within the *Letters*.
- 8 From a growing recent bibliography see in particular, Eco 1985, Murgia 1985, Leach 1990, Riggsby 1995, 1998, Gunderson 1997, Ludolph 1997, Hoffer 1999, Henderson 2002 and the essays collected by Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello in *Arethusa* 2003 (36.2).
- 9 Gamberini 1983 documents formal differences. The difficulty is distinguishing differences that reflect the contrast between "public" or "literary" letters as opposed to "private" or "real" letters from those that might reflect the different *persona* Pliny creates for himself as he moves to letters that reflect his *officia* towards the emperor.
- 10 Until 1502 no editions of the correspondance include book 10, but of the three main early Codices one (Florentinus) breaks off early in book 6, another (Dresdensis) comprises books 1-7 and 9 but neither 8 nor 10 and only the third (Mediceus) contains books 1-9. Pliny's letter on the Christians at least was known by Tertullian and Eusebius. When Symmachus' letters were edited in the early fifth century they were arranged into ten books, the last consisting of letters (*relationes*) to the emperor, strongly implying a ten book edition was known in late antiquity. Discussion in Hardy 1889, Stout 1954 and Reynolds 1983.

- 11 Williams 1990, 2-5. Compare Hardy 1889, v: "Pliny's Letters to Trajan have little share in the literary interest of his other correspondence."
- 12 Williams 1990, 2.
- 13 Hoffer 1999, 5-10 bringing out the centrality of this theme to both the *Letters* and the *Panegyricus*.
- 14 Birley 2000, 17-21 for a very helpful analysis.
- 15 Woolf 2003 on some of these issues.
- 16 Saller 1982 on the distinction between patrons who can deliver *beneficia* themselves and brokers whose service is to put clients in touch with those whose can supply favours.
- 17 Price 1984.
- 18 *Letters* 4.9 for the trial of Julius Bassus; 5.20, 6.5, 6.13, 6.29, 7.6 and 7.10 for that of Varenus Rufus.
- 19 Jones 1999 for a short account.
- 20 Pliny *Letters* 7.29 and 8.6 on Pallas' power under Claudius, 3.14 on Larcus Macedo the senator unable to escape his inherited and inherent servile nature. *Panegyricus* 88 claims that most emperors were slaves of their freedmen until Trajan.
- 21 Sherwin-White tried to reconstruct Pliny's travels around his province on the basis of the order in which individual cities appear, but this seems difficult to square with letter 33 in which Pliny claims to have been touring the province when a first broke out in Nikomedea, unless we are to imagine this tour uneventful or at least giving rise to no letters.
- 22 On the relative urbanisations of Bithynia and Pontus see Sherwin-White 1967, 525-29, Williams 1990, 12-13 drawing heavily on Jones 1971 (or on the first edition of 1937 and the second edition of 1971). Marek 2003 offers a vivid and up to date synthesis of the province.
- 23 Demougouin 1999. For comparison Cappadocia has a single example, Galatia and Pisidia 41, Cilicia 7, Pamphylia 22, Lycia 9 and Asia 176. Differential impact of colonisation is part of the explanation, but the figures are otherwise provide a crude indication of the integration of local élites into the imperial aristocracy. Fernoux 2004, 416-89 provides detailed discussion of a larger number of Bithynian (but not Pontic) senators and equestrians, but one that includes many that he and or Demougouin regard as only probably or possibly of Bithynian origin. But his figures show very clearly how few local notables had entered the equestrian and senatorial orders during the first century AD and how rapid progress was in the first decades of the second century.
- 24 Halfmann 1982, 39-41 (and see preceding note).
- 25 E.g. Riggsby 1995, Henderson 2001.
- 26 Cicero *To his brother Quintus* 1.1
- 27 "Anxiety" in the sense in which it is used by Hoffer 1999 that is.
- 28 Braund 1989 for an interesting discussion.
- 29 For this reason, the objection to this reading of book 10 that it would have been dangerous or unacceptable to make any changes to Trajan's own letters seems to me to have no force. It is impossible to ascertain the authorship of Trajan's letters but Pliny has certainly reordered them if he has not modified them or even composed them himself in the same way Cicero put words into the mouth of Quintus, Atticus and others in his philosophical dialogues. Christian writers certainly believed Trajan's words to be genuine, and perhaps they were. But the essential point is to recognise that Book 10 emerged from within the Trajanic

regime, was written by an insider and presented a view of Trajan wholly in accord with his self-representation in other media.

30 Lucian *Alexander or the False Prophet* 27 on Severianus. Another governor plays only a slightly less discreditable role in chapter 57.

31 I intend to return to this theme at length elsewhere.