



Pliny in Context: Role Models

A reading of Pliny's letters benefits from contextualisation in multiple ways, not only in their relation to one other and to the collection, but also with regard to the influences inherent in them, to their intertexts, and to the Roman intellectual, elite literary world of which Pliny was an integral part.

Role models: the guardian

When Pliny's father died, he became the ward of a successful native of Comum, the fellow-Equestrian Lucius Verginius Rufus. Consul in 63 AD under the emperor Nero, he had been sent to be governor of Upper Germany, giving him command of Roman legions. With these he defeated an uprising in Gaul by Gaius Julius Vindex, who had revolted from Nero. Then the same troops proclaimed Rufus emperor after Nero's suicide, in preference to the officially-appointed, though short-lived emperor, Galba, but Rufus declined the honour. Some time before 75-76 AD, perhaps a little before or after the events of the civil wars of 68-9 AD, which led to the rule of the Flavian dynasty – Vespasian (69-79 AD), his son Titus (79-81 AD) and his younger son Domitian (81-96 AD) – Pliny came into the care of Rufus. Rufus' life and career showed how an Equestrian from northern Italy could succeed in political and military spheres, survive through reigns of different emperors both good and bad, and place service above personal glory. The feelings Pliny held for this man can be seen in his death-portrait, Letter 2.1 written to his close friend Voconius Romanus, as well as in Letter 9.19 where Pliny considers the words Rufus had prepared for inscription on his own tombstone.

Role models: the uncle

Through the 70s AD Pliny the Elder held various government posts and completed his *Natural History*; around the end of the decade he adopted Pliny in his will. Pliny may have seen him as something of a role model, even if he did not get to spend much time with him, successfully writing books, having a scientific interest in the world around him and serving the emperor in various posts. Pliny was at the Bay of Naples when Mount Vesuvius erupted, at his uncle's residence near the base of the Roman navy at Misenum, whose command his



uncle held. Pliny himself bears witness throughout his letters to his uncle's devotion to his studies and his keen interest in nature.

In this selection, we can see some of the impressions left on Pliny by his uncle. Pliny's interest in writing about such a range of topics and the varied nature of his collection reflects the encyclopaedic output of Pliny the Elder, while the two letters dealing with natural phenomena (8.8, 8.17) reveal interests similar to his. Pliny's musings on the writing of history and its purpose cannot fail to be informed by his uncle's literary works, directly referring to them as setting him a literary precedent (5.8), and his engagement with his use of leisure (1.9, 9.6) may owe something to his witnessing and thinking about the work ethic of his adoptive father. Perhaps too some of the humanity shown by Pliny in 7.5 and 8.16 can be attributed to the man who died when unquestioningly taking the risk to respond to a friend's letter seeking his help as the dangers of Vesuvius increased. It is also tempting to wonder if the fact that it was his uncle and not his father who guided him in his formative years is at least in part behind Pliny's displeasure at a friend's severe treatment of his son, admonishing him to recall that 'in exercising your parental authority do not forget that you are a man and the father of a man' (9.12).

Role models: the mentor

Pliny the Elder may have been an important influence, but he was not his formal educator. Sometime in the latter half of the 70s AD, Pliny went to Rome for his education, where he was taught by the rhetorician Quintilian, who was born in Spain but studied in Rome. A teacher who opened his own school, Quintilian was appointed public professor by the emperor Vespasian, was at some point given consular honours by an emperor and practised law. He looked backwards for his models, especially of oratory, preferring Cicero to contemporaries, and possibly also taught the Roman historian Tacitus. Quintilian, after formally retiring, tutored two great-nephews of the emperor Domitian and published his 12-book textbook on rhetoric, the *Institutio Oratoria*, which is still extant.

Quintilian sought to set out a theoretical and practical framework for rhetoric, as a reaction to the oratory of his time, represented chiefly by Seneca. Quintilian emphasised the need to be a good man in order to be a good speaker and the importance of benefitting society. He felt that



a good orator did not need to be a philosopher and that imitation was important, but so was originality stemming from an individual's knowledge.

The influence of Quintilian on Pliny's writing has been explored in detail only recently, but straightforward traces of his impact can be seen in this selection. The case made by Quintilian for *imitatio* with personal adaptation left a mark on his pupil, whose letters engage with works of Cicero, Horace and Seneca, to name just three, while Pliny aims to depict himself as – and perhaps be – a good man in his relationships with others, even with slaves (for instance 1.9 dispensing advice; 4.19 and 7.5 on his relationship with his wife Calpurnia; 8.16 about his slaves; 8.17 showing concern for a friend's safety). As for being a philosopher, he could value their opinions and saw merit in the discipline, but consciously was not one (for one example, see Letter 1.10).

More specifically, both 2.20 and 3.16 employ the idea that a minimum of three examples are required to make a point, called in the latter 'the law of rhetoricians'; this is a theory which Quintilian discusses in his handbook (*Inst. Orat.* 4.5.3), where he rejects in writing the traditional idea that three or fewer points should be the rule. What is apparent is that the teachings of his mentor helped shape Pliny's approach to his own work, adopting and adapting elements of Quintilian's model for oratory to create structures for his own genre of letter-writing.