



## Pliny in Context: Literary Models and Predecessors, and the People in the Letters

### *Literary models: predecessors*

Letter-writing did not start with Cicero, but the large output of personal and public letters written to and by friends and acquaintances certainly provided the possibility of a model in Latin. Published and edited after Cicero's death, largely due to the efforts of his secretary Tiro, this collection was available to be read by the time of Pliny. There were the two books of literary, verse letters by Horace, while the philosopher Seneca used the medium of letters to meditate on a number of moral themes. Essays in letter form, with a focus on the importance of philosophy in living a good life, they represent the views of a Roman Stoic, and presented Pliny with much material with which to engage.

But the existing literature of prose and verse letters was not all that Pliny could consider to inform his own work. Just considering these three authors, all wrote more than letters: Cicero's corpus included speeches, philosophical works and books on rhetoric; the *Satires* (*Sermones*) of Horace were the verse form on which his own letters were modelled; and Seneca wrote moral essays, seven books on the natural world (*Naturales Quaestiones*), tragedies and more. The poetry of Ovid, not least the *Heroides* - fictional verse letters – and the poetry written in his time of exile (*Epistulae Ex Ponto*), shares themes typical of poetic genres but which appear in Pliny. This list is in no way exhaustive; indeed, as a well-educated Roman of the upper-class and the adopted son of a man with a keen interest in books, Pliny would have read widely, and it is an impossible task to trace all such material and every specific reference to the works of others in the collection.

But as the appreciation of Pliny's letters has increased, so has the awareness of his debt to others and the depth of literary allusion and intertext contained in his collection. In the introduction to each letter in the Commentary there are references to specific works of others, especially letters of Cicero or Seneca in particular, where these are models or at least seem to inform Pliny's writings directly. In such cases Pliny still makes the material his own,



consciously adapting these models and putting his own stamp of them to be part of his own literary project.

The influence of these predecessors can be seen broadly in the choice of subject matter of some letters and Pliny's presentation of himself, such as his extolling the virtues of the country and retirement (1.9, 9.6) in a manner reminiscent of Horace. Cicero's correspondence with his wife Terentia and his grief at the death of his daughter Tullia, appears to be echoed (4.19, 7.5) while there are several verbal echoes of his language in 5.8, and his thoughts are in the background in Pliny's views on leisure (*otium*) in 1.9 and his sadness for the death of slaves (8.16). Often Pliny is not reacting to a single author or a single work. Thus for instance in his letter (8.16) on his slaves' deaths (itself part of a larger cycle of letters referencing them) it is not just Cicero with whom he grapples, but Seneca too. Seneca also discusses themes of grief and consolation, writes about leisure and is himself an example of a senator living under a tyrannical emperor. Pliny's letter on the spring at Clitumnus (8.8) and the flooding of the Tiber (8.17) likely benefitted from Senecan writing on water in his *Naturales Quaestiones*, and when Pliny decries the fanaticism for chariot-racing in 9.6, Cicero's negative comments on games in the arena and Seneca's aversion to gladiatorial combat surely present the backdrop to the scene being painted.

Pliny is reflective and gives a number of subjects much thought, especially in the *sententiae* (neat sayings or memorable, clever summaries) with which he ends many letters, but he consciously rejects being a philosopher like Seneca. This seems to be how Pliny interacts with his predecessors: reacting to their literature, engaging with their ideas and presenting himself for consideration in light of them, sometimes subtly, sometimes not, but always with the focus firmly on his own writings.

### ***Literary models: contemporaries***

Pliny did not only write about topics which had been discussed before, nor should we consider that there has to be a specific reason behind the theme of every letter. Nonetheless it is important to remember that the letters in the nine-book collection of correspondence with private individuals was edited and published by Pliny himself in his own lifetime, and so these letters have been selected for inclusion and arranged to fit in with Pliny's vision for his



project. This extends to the contents of the letters, which must reflect Pliny's interests and character but also contemporary society and its tastes.

The dating of the collection and of individual letters has long been attempted but conclusions lack certainty. Similarly, the manner of the publication of the books is unknown, whether they were published individually, in set groups of three, or otherwise. What is clear is that within books the letters are not in strictly chronological order and that specific dating of individual letters is, unless dateable historical events such as a trial are mentioned, impossible. Some inferences can be made, for instance 1.9 with its emphasis on Pliny's free time suggests a time without high office, so sometime between 96-98 AD is posited due to his holding of prefectures of treasuries either side of this. But the publication of the nine books seems to fall mostly in the first decade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (100-110 AD) under the reign of the emperor Trajan and after Pliny had been suffect consul; obviously many letters in the first books of the collection predate this period and come from the 90s AD.

We know from his own writings that Pliny was part of the elite literary circle at Rome. He held and gave recitations and often attended performances through a sense of obligation, since the speaker had attended one of Pliny's recitals. The impression created is that of club whose members tested out their work on one another, seeking advice and approval, and were well-read and constantly engaged with the literature and spirit of their times. Quintilian's handbooks were published mid-90s AD and the poets Silius Italicus and Statius were active at this time. Pliny was likely a patron of the poet Martial, whose epigrams covered a wide-range of topics. From a little after this period come the satires of Juvenal and the biographies of Suetonius, whom Pliny counted among his friends, the life-chronicler of the emperors from Augustus to Domitian and of famous men. Plutarch, another biographer, wrote his *Parallel Lives* setting famous Greeks and Romans side-by-side around this time. The Roman historian Tacitus is the recipient of eleven letters from Pliny, the most of any addressee, and it was to him that Pliny sent the two Vesuvius letters.

As with the treatment of the literature of predecessors, specific references to others or clear allusions are noted in the relevant sections of the Commentary, and in some cases are expanded on the Companion Website. But it is important to consider in general the intellectual climate of the times when Pliny was writing and editing his letters. A few



examples are sufficient to create the impression. 5.8 reflects the literary outlook of Pliny's circle. Criticism of contemporary society and its morals was nothing new and a particular topic of interest to Horace, but in Juvenal such satire reached new heights. 1.9, 2.6, 9.6 and 9.12 should all be read in this light. Similarly the deaths of important men had been given much space from the earliest histories in Greek and were integral parts of the works of the Roman historians Sallust and Livy, while the biographical writings of Cato the Elder and Cornelius Nepos had focussed on individuals. Yet Tacitus took this a stage further in his histories and in his *Agricola*, while the large-scale works of Suetonius and Plutarch reflect an increased interest in the lives – and deaths – of great men. Pliny's obituary of Corellius Rufus in 1.12 must be viewed in this context and not just as part of the continuum in letter-writing. So too perhaps the personal, individualised nature of the Regulus letters (2.20, 4.2).

### ***People***

A large number of individuals are mentioned by name just in the fifteen letters in this selection. Addressees each have their own entry where their name appears in the Commentary while the main information on a named person is supplied as appropriate. Some names are not known outside the collection of letters, others are mentioned in inscriptions or in texts by other authors. For instance Arria the Elder is the subject of 3.16. where Pliny records other instances of her impressive character. Her famous words '*Paete, non dolet*', are mentioned twice in this letter, but also appear in an epigram of Martial, whose patron was Pliny, and there are other accounts of this incident in a number of writers. Often knowing more about these individuals aids our understanding of references and their contexts. Though the historian Tacitus is Pliny's most frequent addressee, he is not the recipient of any of the letters in the selection. But he doubtlessly should be borne in mind when reading 5.8 on writing history, and scholars have noted similarities in some elements of the flooding description of 8.17 in works by the historian. Calvisius Rufus is the only person to receive two letters in this selection, on Regulus' legacy-hunting (2.20) and on chariot-racing (9.6). He was a close friend of Pliny's, as was Voconius Romanus, to whom 8.8 is addressed. The topics which Pliny writes about to certain friends seem to be relevant, as some of the more important themes, such as the obituary of Rufus (1.12) to Calestrius Tiro, are contained in letters which are addressed to an inner circle of trusted men.



Some names crop up frequently because they were related to Pliny or of particular interest to him. The letter to Calpurnia Hispulla (4.19) and to his wife (7.5) are part of a number of letters in a cycle about Pliny's wife Calpurnia, including Letters 6.4 and 6.7 to her and Letters 8.10 and 8.11 to her grandfather Fabatus and aunt Hispulla respectively, about Calpurnia's miscarriage. Regulus features in several letters, not just 2.20 and 4.2, including Pliny's additional attack on his manner of mourning his dead son (Letter 4.7) and some reminiscences after his death, in Letter 6.2, and his name occurs in Tacitus. The significance of some people is lost when there are no other attestations of their names; for example Attilius Crescens, whose witticism concludes 1.9, is mentioned in another letter also for his wit but is otherwise unknown.

One other feature concerning names of addressees is worthy of note. While the historicity of Pliny's recipients is not in question, it appears that Pliny on occasions deliberately wrote about subjects to an individual which punned on their name. So 1.9 to Fundanus is about Pliny's estate (*fundus* in Latin), while the accounts of Fannia, the *neptis* ('granddaughter') of the Elder Arria in 3.16, are written to Nepos. There is no mercy (Latin *clementia*) in Pliny's description of Regulus' excessive grief in 4.2 to Attius Clemens while the feelings Pliny expresses for his slaves in 8.16, to Plinius Paternus, are certainly those of a father-figure (*pater*); similarly the tone of 9.6 to Junior is that of an elder admonishing someone younger.