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## Pliny's Progress: On a Troublesome Domitianic Career

The career of Pliny the Younger is among the best known of all senatorial *cursus* – and one of the most controversial. Two intermediate posts have proved particularly troublesome:<sup>1</sup> the praetorship and the prefecture of the military treasury (*praefectura aerari militaris* or PAM). The first of those is the only stage in Pliny's early and middle career which can be externally dated. It also fixes the timing of the famous Domitianic treason trials and (as usually reconstructed) contributes a unique piece of evidence about the *ius liberorum*. The prefecture, meanwhile, looms large in a debate about Pliny's «honesty». Did he owe that post, too, to Domitian? If so, how can he claim to have halted in his career once that emperor's «tyranny» had set in?

Critical orthodoxy has long made Pliny praetor in 93 and PAM in 94–96, precisely Domitian's last years. Dissent has been voiced from time to time, however, and a recent account shifts both posts out of the danger zone (praetor 89 or 90, PAM under Nerva, 96–97).<sup>2</sup> This revision is gaining ground and has so far gone unchallenged;<sup>3</sup> since it is in my view problematic on several counts, reconsideration seems due. But the orthodoxy, we shall see, is also ready for scrutiny.

Teasing out chronology is a tricky business and certainty is evasive. Nevertheless, refining the parameters (and ruling out the impossible) must represent an advance in historical understanding and offer a sounder basis for any assessment of this (in)fa-  
mous politician and apologist. After laying out the problem (I), this paper will demonstrate that Pliny cannot have been praetor before 93 (II), but also that scholars have

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<sup>1</sup> The legalities of Pliny's proconsular posting to Bithynia–Pontus now seem settled: see ALFÖLDY 1999, modified by COTTON 2000, 233–234, and ECK 2001, 226–229. Otherwise on his consular career, which will not be a concern of this paper, see SHERWIN-WHITE 1966 (henceforth S-W), 78–80; BIRLEY 2000a, 16–17.

<sup>2</sup> BIRLEY 2000a, 9–16.

<sup>3</sup> Endorsed by e.g. MARCHESI 2008, 2, GIBSON – MORELLO 2012, 265 (qualified) and, it is true, WHITTON 2013, 6 n. 29; considered irrefutable by STRUNK 2013, 95 n. 18 and 101–103, and WINSBURY 2014, 91–107.

been wrong to exclude 94, both for that magistracy (III) and for the trials of Senecio, Rusticus and the younger Helvidius (IV). Whatever Pliny's exact tenure at the *aerarium militare*, it was all but certainly a Domitianic appointment (V). Our protagonist emerges as a precise – but tendentious – chronicler of his preconsular career.

### I. The Problem

At several points in his Epistles Pliny claims proximity to «victims» of Domitian, and suggests that he came close to a similar fate.<sup>4</sup> But nowhere is he more explicit than in the last sentence of the Panegyricus (95. 2–5), as he grandly pledges his humble loyalty as consul:<sup>5</sup>

*uos modo fauete huic proposito et credite: (3) si, cursu quodam prouectus ab illo insidiosissimo principe antequam profiteretur odium bonorum, postquam professus est substiti (4) <et>,<sup>6</sup> cum uiderem quae ad honores compendia paterent, longius iter malui; si malis temporibus inter maestos et pauentes, bonis inter securos gaudentesque numeror; si denique in tantum diligo optimum principem, in quantum inuisus pessimo fui: (5) ego reuerentiae uestrae sic semper inseruiam, non ut me consulem et mox consularem, sed ut candidatum consulatus putem.*

Do you only look on my intentions with favour and believe me: if, having been advanced at something of a pace by that most treacherous emperor before he confessed his hatred of good men, I halted once he had confessed it and preferred, when I saw what shortcuts to magistracies lay open, the longer route; if I have numbered among the sorrowful and fearful in bad times, among the carefree and joyful in good; if, in short, I love the best of emperors as much as I was hateful to the worst, I shall always be so obedient to your reverence as to think myself not a consul and a consular thereafter, but a consular candidate.

Pliny holds out three proofs of his good faith (*si ... si ... si ...*). If the latter two can hardly be tested, the first is a specific claim: he admits to rapid advancement under Domitian (*cursu quodam prouectus*) but asserts that, once things turned sour, he «halted» (*substiti*). A strong statement – immediately modified and softened with a gloss, *longius iter malui*. But when did that rapid advance take place, when did Pliny stop, and what was the «longer route»?

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Ep. 1. 5; 1. 7. 2; 1. 14; 2. 18; 3. 11. 3; 4. 21; 4. 24. 4–5; 7. 19; 7. 27. 12–14; 7. 33; 9. 13. On Pliny as martyr *manqué* see SHELTON 1987; CARLON 2009, 18–67; BARAZ 2012.

<sup>5</sup> I follow MYNORS' Oxford texts of Pliny (Epistles, 1963; Panegyrici, 1964), with my own punctuation, translations and the emendation next defended.

<sup>6</sup> SCHWARZ 1746, 487–488 (after GESNER), rightly rejected HEUMANN's conjectured *si* here, recognising *cum ... malui* as a parenthesis glossing *substiti*, but the asyndeton is hard to swallow (the Senecan «parallels» of DURRY 1938, 226, do not help). Hence my conjectured *et* (cf. 85. 7 *et cum*); alternatively, *cum<que>* (cf. 86. 2; also Ov. Tr. 1. 2. 99–105).

The orthodox view is essentially the reconstruction of MOMMSEN (1869),<sup>7</sup> elements of which go back to MASSON's pioneering biography of 1703.<sup>8</sup> It can be broken down into four stages:

(i) Ep. 3. 11 recalls Pliny's visit to the philosopher Artemidorus and loan to him, when Pliny was praetor and after the treason trials. Since those trials postdate the death of Agricola on 23 August 93,<sup>9</sup> Pliny cannot have been praetor before 93.

(ii) The trials are assumed to have begun soon after Agricola's death and to have been expeditious, narrowing the *praetura* to 93 or 94.

(iii) In Ep. 7. 16 Pliny mentions his earlier magistracies. By a series of inferences MOMMSEN deduced that he was *tribunus plebis* and praetor in successive years. Since Pliny (a) abstained from advocacy as tribune (Ep. 1. 23. 2) and (b) prosecuted Baebius Massa for extortion in 93,<sup>10</sup> he could not have been tribune in 93, nor then praetor in 94. *Ergo* his praetorship, and the treason trials, fall in 93.

(iv) MOMMSEN gave Pliny three years as PAM, which must therefore have run either 94–96 or 95–97 and be owed to Domitian.<sup>11</sup> The «halt» in Pan. 95 consisted in not becoming consul sooner than he did.

This carefully erected edifice, I shall argue, is correct in outline but open to contestation on several points and especially insecure in (iii), the sole element on which all subsequent critics have agreed.

The two most influential voices, SHERWIN-WHITE and SYME, followed MOMMSEN, varying only in their reconstructions of Pliny's *cursus* before the praetorship, in fixing PAM more confidently to 94–96, and in criticising Pliny for not mentioning the latter post (it is known only from his *cursus* inscriptions).<sup>12</sup> This being so, a reassertion of MOMMSEN's thesis, at least in part, might seem superfluous. But dissent has not been lacking. First was OTTO (1919), who redated the *praetura* to 95, allowed just two

<sup>7</sup> MOMMSEN 1869, 79–88, in a paper now apparently cited more often than read. Revised versions can be found in his collected papers (1906, 366–468) and in French translation (1873).

<sup>8</sup> MASSON 1703, 13–15 (= id. 1709, 59–66). This was the first attempt to date Pliny's career absolutely.

<sup>9</sup> Tac. Ag. 44. 1–45. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ep. 7. 33. 4–9; also 1. 7. 2; 3. 4. 4; 6. 29. 8. This date for Massa's trial is not quite secure (below, Section IV).

<sup>11</sup> From (circa) January 98 Pliny was *praefectus aerari Saturni*, a post he held until his suffect consulate in September–October 100 (S-W 75–78).

<sup>12</sup> S-W 763–771 (adapted from SHERWIN-WHITE 1957); more censoriously, SYME 1958, 76–78 and 656–658; id. 1991, 561–565. The inscriptions are CIL V 5262 (= ILS 2927, Comum) and 5667 (Vercellae). If Pliny commissioned the former (ECK 2001), he evidently did not suppress PAM altogether (STRUNK 2013, 100–101) – though epigraphic and literary self-portraiture hardly served the same audience and purpose.

years as PAM (96–97), and branded Pliny a liar.<sup>13</sup> Based as it is on one false inference<sup>14</sup> and several questionable ones, his chronology now finds scant favour<sup>15</sup> – though in framing the debate as a question of «honesty», OTTO kicked off a «damn or defend» contest which still thrives in some quarters to this day.<sup>16</sup>

A challenge to both MOMMSEN and OTTO came from HARTE (1935), who moved the praetorship the other way, to 90 or 91. Assuming that a three-year PAM followed at once, he had Pliny clear of office by the end of 93 or 94 – well before Domitian's death, and with honour intact. HARTE's case was countered by SHERWIN-WHITE, elaborated by KUIJPER, refuted again by SOVERINI, and revived with variation by BIRLEY, in his short but significant *vita*.<sup>17</sup> BIRLEY, who does not mention KUIJPER or SOVERINI, makes Pliny praetor earlier still, in 89 or 90, and gives him a brief Nervan tenure as PAM, from late 96 until the end of 97<sup>18</sup> – so producing the fullest exoneration of all, for those anxious about Pliny's integrity. *Prima facie* it seems unlikely. Six or seven years as a praetorian senator with no administrative post would look dangerously like *inertia* – perilous at the time,<sup>19</sup> and grounds for a bolder claim afterwards than *longius iter malui*. But there are more specific reasons to be sceptical.

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<sup>13</sup> OTTO 1919, 43–50 (cf. 52 «menschlich höchst unerfreulich»); id. 1923, 11 («bewußt gelogen»).

<sup>14</sup> Namely that Pliny abstained from advocacy during all his magistracies (misprising *promiscue* in Ep. 10. 3a.1; cf. S-W 765 n. 6); this would exclude 93 for the *praetura*.

<sup>15</sup> Refutations begin with BAEHRENS 1923; see first S-W 763–769 and SOVERINI 1989, 523–526, demonstrating the frailty of his arguments and improbability (if not absolute impossibility: n. 82) of his conclusion. The scheme was endorsed by HANSLIK 1948, 126–127 (see contra S-W 770–771 and JONES 1968, 138–139), and has just occasionally resurfaced since (e.g. BENGTSOHN 1979, 234–236; LUDOLPH 1997, 44–48). Though he rejects OTTO's dating, STROBEL 1983 and 2003 is notable for his harsh view of Pliny as «Mitläufer» and «Wendehals» (summarised in id. 2010, 124–5). One may question how far modern experiences of dictatorship and rehabilitation – which doubtless inform much that has been written on Pliny's Domitianic career – help us comprehend the senatorial mentality of the period.

<sup>16</sup> It reaches an acme in the «trial» of Pliny staged by WINSBURY in his introductory biography (2014, 11–12 and 91–107).

<sup>17</sup> S-W 769–770; KUIJPER 1968 (an entertaining but exasperating blend of tendentious ingenuity and tub-thumping advocacy); SOVERINI 1989, 526–530 (with patient acumen); BIRLEY (as n. 2 above). Brief retorts to KUIJPER also in LEPPER 1970, 568–569; STROBEL 1983, 47–48; SHELTON 1987, 122–123.

<sup>18</sup> This Nervan date was already suggested by OERTEL 1939, 184 (who, however, put the *praetura* in 95).

<sup>19</sup> *Inertia* was fatal to Herennius Senecio (Dio Xiph. 67. 13. 2 with ECK 2010, 352); cf. Tac. H. 1. 2. 3 *omissi ... honores pro crimine*.