

An abstract for a chapter to be published in:

Whitton and König edd., *Literary Interactions under Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian*

'The empire of letters: Book 10 of Pliny's *Letters* and imperial correspondence'

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This chapter re-contextualises Book 10 of Pliny's *Letters* within the small but significant corpus of imperial correspondence transmitted by inscriptions and the jurists in order to reconsider how we should read imperial correspondence in general and Pliny Book 10 in particular.

i. The conventions of imperial correspondence

The first part of the chapter responds to three brilliant and iconoclastic papers published independently by Greg Woolf, Philip Stadter, and Carlos Noreña in 2006 and 2007 which have shaken the comfortable world of scholarship on Book 10 of Pliny's *Letters*. Despite differences of style and emphasis, the three papers share much common ground. All three argue that the published letters are not the artless contents of an archive, but the product of a thoughtful editorial hand – and suggest that that the editor was Pliny himself. All three also claim that the letters themselves are not typical of correspondence between an emperor and senatorial governor, but rather idiosyncratic constructs specially composed or at least reworked in the service of the particular project of Book 10. That project is variously formulated as presenting 'an artfully constructed image of the good aristocrat in his province, and of the best of emperors in Rome' (Woolf), 'presenting the very best of the imperial system', 'a sophisticated exercise in imperial self-presentation' (Stadter) and idealising the relationship between Trajan and Pliny, to the benefit of both (Noreña).

I put these claims to the test by comparing the letters of Book 10 to other surviving examples of correspondence between emperors and governors. While accepting the weak thesis that the book as a whole is the creation of a thoughtful editor rather than an artless dossier (and the possibility that the editor was Pliny himself), I challenge the strong thesis that the individual letters are atypical and have obviously been reworked in the service of a particular literary project. I show that most of the features that have been identified as anomalous – notably the parsimonious restriction of each letter to a single subject, the care taken to paint the best possible picture of Trajan's rule and his relationship to Pliny, Trajan's use of the vocative *carissime* in addressing Pliny and Pliny's use of *domine* when addressing Trajan – are not anomalous at all, but rather entirely in keeping with other surviving imperial correspondence.

ii. Reading imperial correspondence

The chapter goes on to consider the implications for how we read imperial correspondence and Pliny Book 10. My point in critiquing the arguments of Woolf, Stadter and Noreña is not to deny that the letters of Book 10 construct an idealised image of the relationship between imperial centre and provincial periphery and that between emperor and the senatorial elite, but rather to show that this is in no way peculiar to Book 10. Even in 'real' correspondence, emperors and governors couched their relationship in a language of affectionate friendship and regularly idealised the operations of Roman power in the provinces. Emperors like Trajan were not just engaged in a functional correspondence with their subordinates. They were constantly using this correspondence to negotiate their relationship with individuals and the imperial elite as a whole. They also used it to propagate grand visions of the imperial project in idealising language which they could expect the governors and other officials to pass on to their

provincial subjects in their own letters and edicts. All imperial correspondence deserves to be read with the same close attention to rhetoric and ideology that Woolf, Stadter and Noreña apply to Book 10.

There remains the question of how we should read Book 10 in particular. What happens when a body of relatively typical letters are selected, arranged, published as a continuous text and circulated in a literary culture in which the letter book was well established as a literary form? The final section of the chapter explores possible reading strategies, beginning from the proposition that the closest analogue for the relation in which Book 10 stands to 'real' correspondence is the Ciceronian letter corpus, rather than the earlier books of Pliny's letters – yet it circulated in a reading culture whose expectations of a letter book must have been profoundly reshaped by Books 1-9.