

THE SHADOW OF VESUVIUS: A LIFE OF PLINY

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The Roman Empire gets a bad rap. This is particularly true of the members of its ruling class, who get the worse of the obvious comparison with Republican virtue, and are often viewed as placeholders and strivers orbiting around one emperor or another, offering nothing to the rest of mankind. No doubt many such existed. But we should not forget that the Empire was a very successful endeavor, especially in its early years, and success would not have been possible without at least some competent and virtuous men in the ruling class. Daisy Dunn's *The Shadow of Vesuvius* profiles two such men: Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus; A.D. 23–79) and his nephew and adopted son, Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (A.D. 61–c. 113)). The two men were very different, yet each strove to benefit and serve Rome, as well as to achieve great things himself, in a way our own ruling class has long since abandoned.

Dunn's book is a joint biography, though it focuses more on the Younger (whom she calls simply "Pliny," and the Elder she calls "Pliny the Elder," a usage I will adopt). As it happens, I recently bought, in physical form, the entire Loeb Classical Library (544 volumes), as I amass a library that seeks to contain all the core of Western civilization. (I estimate it will end at somewhere north of 20,000 volumes; that's what my daughter calls a "flex.") So I was able to read chunks of each man's own writing as I went through Dunn's book, which helped bring the narrative to brighter life. Creating a biography about the two Plinys was, I am sure, a challenge, since few primary sources exist for their lives, other their own (few) surviving writings. No doubt trying to make the story more compelling than the Wikipedia entries for the men, which are very dull, Dunn organizes her book around the Roman seasons, and parallels them to Pliny's life and times, weaving in backwards-looking references to Pliny the Elder.

Each man, while he accomplished much, is remembered today most vividly for one deed. For Pliny the Elder, it was dying in the ash of Vesuvius, rushing across the Bay of Naples towards danger with the dual goal of organizing a rescue operation (his duty as admiral of one

of the Roman fleets) and trying to examine the eruption up close (for scientific purposes). Hence the title of this book—his nephew was near the eruption, too, but stayed safely on the other side of the Bay. For Pliny, it was his correspondence with the Emperor Trajan about how he should treat the ever-growing numbers of Christians in the Black Sea province he was governing at the time, which provides a crucial piece of historical data. Yet, as Dunn shows, there was much more to each man.

Until quite recently, in fact, Pliny the Elder was primarily known not for how he died, but for his magnum opus, the enormous *Natural History*. It is a confection of Pliny's own observations and facts taken from a vast number of then-extant sources. The *Natural History* was the first encyclopedia—thirty-seven volumes of description of practically everything under the sun, much of it very inaccurate, we now know, yet astounding to his contemporaries, and used as a reference work for well more than a thousand years. He had just finished it when Vesuvius erupted, in A.D. 79. Of the two Plinys, the Elder was better known in the West until the late Middle Ages (and in fact the two Plinys were for a long time confused as one), because his *Natural History* survived, and little survived of the Pliny the Younger's writings. But a treasure trove of his letters was discovered in an abbey in Paris around 1500, and when printed, ensured his reputation. For Pliny's *Letters* give an unparalleled glimpse into the mind and practice of a senior administrator of the Empire, who did everything from work as a lawyer to administer drains.

The primary career of both was serving the Roman state; writing was a sideline. They managed to do both, in large part because to an obsessive degree, they tried to not waste time. Once Pliny the Elder lectured a dinner companion who corrected the pronunciation of a slave reading a poem that, because of this pedantic correction, they had lost time they could never get back. The *Natural History* showed what could be accomplished by continual study and work. I have a lot of sympathy for this desire not to waste time, although one of the downsides of modern life is that sustained focus is far harder, given the inevitable and innumerable distractions, and, for almost all people, the need to make a living. Not to mention that having slaves tend to your every need certainly helps focus, and that's not on offer today either.

Although Pliny the Elder was educated as a lawyer, his twenties were spent in the military, a typical path for a member of the equestrian class.

Even then, he was writing—though as with so many ancient works most of his books are lost. Early on he wrote technical works such as *On Throwing the Javelin from Horseback*, and later a twenty-volume history of the Roman experience in Germany. When he returned to Rome, practicing as a lawyer and working as a public servant, his career spanned several of most colorful, and dubious, Emperors, including Nero. He avoided the fate of Seneca, but retreated during times of trouble from writing history, which could be dangerous if perceived as a challenge to the present regime, to writing technical manuals on grammar.

Once Nero was gone, life became more settled, and Pliny the Elder was able to focus on, and complete, the *Natural History*. In A.D. 79, he was fulfilling his duties to the Emperor Vespasian, living at Misenum, on the Bay of Naples, across from Vesuvius. Never married, he was staying with his sister and her son, Pliny. Seeing the eruption, and receiving a message from a terrified friend, the Elder launched the fleet across the bay, into a rain of ash and pumice that was so intense it formed islands in the sea. His nephew remained at Misenum, obsessively studying, training to also become a lawyer. The next morning, Pliny the Elder was dead, suffocated in Stabiae (south of Pompeii); his nephew had temporarily fled Misenum, driven out by ash and earthquakes.

Soon after his uncle's death, Pliny began his career, at eighteen, as a lawyer for civil cases, mostly inheritance, in Rome. This was a career choice that could make a man's name, through his oration and logical skill, which is why Pliny chose it. Amusingly, many of the cases were not that different than today's, such as a woman suing to void her octogenarian father's resettling of his estate on his new young wife, whom he had married ten days after meeting her. (Strangely, elsewhere Dunn suggests that the Romans considered forty-three to be "elderly," when the Romans were very clear that the forties were the prime of a man's life.) It used to be common knowledge, and is now forgotten, the huge emphasis the Classical world put on rhetoric, now completely a lost art. (Pliny was taught by Quintilian, one of the most famous Roman teachers of rhetoric.) It makes one wonder what a skilled orator could accomplish in politics today—would his talents be wasted on the masses, with their short attention span and low intelligence? Or would his oration, if pitched correctly, sway the masses? I suspect the latter. But

nobody trains for this, and the ancients recognized that training was crucial—talent alone was not enough, though it would certainly help.

We remember Pliny not as a lawyer, but for his *Letters*, which are our only detailed record of a man of his station's daily activity. He began life in the equestrian class, but rose through position and wealth to the senatorial class, and served in several key functions of the Roman state. The *Letters* were edited for publication by Pliny himself; unfortunately, he removed dates and much technical matter that we would find interesting, in order to make smoother reading. As shown by his publishing his own correspondence, he was very desirous of eternal fame, and this made him receptive to flattery from friends such as Tacitus that he was on the road to achieving that fame. Flattery didn't ruin him, though; it just made him work even more obsessively. Yet, as Dunn discusses at length, he was equally interested in domestic contentment. He was devoted to his second wife, Calpurnia (the first had died), and very sad they had no children. He was equally devoted to the natural world, spending much time on the land around his villas. Pliny enjoyed both the city and the countryside; the former appealed to his sense of ambition (and he generously funded public works in the towns he lived near), the latter to his interest in nature and the ability to focus on his work. No doubt he was an interesting man to talk to, though maybe a bit pedantic.

Pliny's home town, and where he often lived when he was not in Rome or fulfilling some other duty, was Comum, modern Como, on the shores of Lake Como. He lived not far from where George Clooney spends his summers now, although nobody has ever accurately accused Clooney of benefiting mankind in any material way (and somehow his invitations to his parties keep getting lost on their way to me). Both Pliny and his uncle recorded a spring that ebbed and flowed near their villa. That spring ebbs and flows to this day, now within the confines of a luxury villa rented as a hotel, the Villa Pliniana. It sleeps twenty and can be yours for roughly \$20,000 a night. Pliny also inherited a villa in Umbria, where he spent his summers—and which was closer to Rome, which depending on his responsibilities and the risks of being in the city at the time, might be desirable or not.

Pliny's goal was to achieve some sort of magnum opus, as his uncle had, but this was doomed not to be. A competent poet, an excellent lawyer, a diligent administrator, he worked hard, but never focused

enough on a single thing. He might have written memorable histories, had he tried—but the times, especially under the Emperor Domitian, made that a risky business, as friends and acquaintances of his found out to their sorrow. Domitian was erratic and dangerous, and ultimately assassinated in A.D. 96; Pliny claimed that Domitian was about to attack him when he died first. Yet Pliny's career flourished under him, something he tried to downplay in his later letters. Regardless, again like his uncle, after an inconstant emperor Pliny was able to enjoy stability under a more even-keeled emperor, in his case Trajan. Other than his *Letters*, the only writing Pliny is remembered for is his *Panegyric* in praise of Trajan, an effusive but informative speech praising the new emperor. In the end, Pliny the Elder wrote about things outside himself and objectively achieved more, while Pliny, in the modern vein, wrote about himself, even if that was not his goal in life, and accomplished less.

I found it interesting that the morals of Rome often come through in the writings of both Plinys (and if you read all their writings, no doubt they come through even more often). For example, Dunn notes that abortion was an extremely serious crime in Rome, and when Domitian impregnated his niece, his crime of aborting the baby was regarded as equally unacceptable as the incest. No doubt part of this was the increasing Roman concern at the failure of the elite to have enough children, a major focus of Augustus—but it was more than that. The HBO series *Rome*, which went to some lengths to ensure accuracy in detail, showed one of the main characters throwing his dead wife's body in the sewer after she confessed while dying to having earlier had an abortion. Other excellent laws and customs we should also imitate also tried to address the need for children—for example, that a man who had three children was granted significant privileges, including being able to stand for office early, and his wife was granted extra legal privileges as well. Nonetheless, given that some of the earliest Christian writings condemn abortion, the practice must have been widespread, and certainly, as Sarah Ruden has pointed out in her excellent *Paul Among the People*, much of Roman morality seems monstrous to us, with the Christian framework being the base of all our morality, even among those who today disclaim Christianity. Still, the Romans were reality-based, and that means that in many things, they came to sensible moral

and legal conclusions, something that can no longer be said of our own government and ruling class, God rot them all.

Pliny ended his career, and as far as we can tell his days (we do not know exactly when, or how, he died), in Bithynia-Pontus, a Roman province on the north shore of the Black Sea, in what is now Turkey. He corresponded regularly with Trajan (although it is hard to tell whether some of the letters from Trajan were really written by secretaries), and this produced what Pliny is most remembered for—the first detailed description of the Roman administrative response to the exploding Christian population. At first, he summoned local people before him on the basis of anonymous accusations, executing Christians who would not recant (except Roman citizens, who were sent to Rome for trial). Nonetheless, Pliny was confused, because there was no clear rule regarding Christians, and he could not figure out, from a Roman state perspective, what the Christians were guilty of. He executed them for defying a magistrate, himself, not for the content of their religion. (All this is covered in detail in Robert Louis Wilken's *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*.) To ease his confusion, Pliny sought guidance from the Emperor.

Pliny's goal, his assignment, was to maintain order. Concern about groups that might threaten order was not limited to Christians (although Christians were a particular target, because of rumors spread by their enemies of particular social abuses: cannibalism, orgies, and the like). The fundamental matter for Pliny, and for Trajan, was that the Christians constituted a type of group that the Roman state found very problematic—a private group that met in secret, often at night, for uncertain ends. Earlier Pliny had proposed to Trajan, after a disastrous fire in Nicomedia, to form an organization of 150 firefighters. Trajan overruled this, and instead ordered Pliny to ban any such group. He feared it would become a *hetaeria*—a political club. (Supplying firefighting equipment and teaching citizens how to use it was fine; it was the organization that was the problem.) The Roman state was very suspicious of *hetaeriae*; they were unreadable by the state and could easily form the locus of rebellion. Not all were forbidden—for example, funerary societies, formed for narrow, open purposes, were accepted. This governmental attitude has a lot in common with the attitude of the modern state as described by James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State*—a “cadastral” approach, where the state wants

the citizenry to be readable at all times like a map. Truly private groups make this impossible, by making themselves illegible to the state, and thereby threaten the state—not just an oppressive state, but any state that seeks to maintain strict order from the top down.

As far as the Christians, Trajan struck a middle ground, dialing back Pliny's initial response. In response to Pliny's puzzled query, Trajan emphatically rejected using anonymous accusers as the spring for investigations (under Domitian, and frequently in Rome, informers stirred up trouble, and Trajan wanted to discourage the practice). He also discouraged hunting out Christians, although he agreed those proven guilty of being Christian should be punished—something the Christians pointed out was incoherent, because if they were guilty of something, they should be hunted, and if it was not necessary to hunt them, they were clearly not guilty of anything.

We should be clear that the Roman government was correct about private groups being problematic for the cadastral state. A great many of the significant societal changes in history have been sparked by private groups organized around a common political goal. All history is full of innumerable such episodes. Why is this? No doubt it is because such groups make possible successful conspiracies against the powers of the age. They provide psychological support among the like-minded, and if a conspiracy advances, they provide logistical support, and ultimately the nucleus for action to change some aspect of the state. The problem, from the perspective of the government, is not that all the members of *hetaeriae* may act in concert to achieve political ends that are not to the taste of those in power. Any successful sizeable group tends to be too unwieldy for coordinated action that directly opposes the government. The problem is rather that a subset of the group may secretly act together to become, to repurpose a modern term, changemakers, and when they implement their plan, will have a ready and receptive audience and set of potential helpers in the larger group.

Although they know no history, today's Left, temporarily ascendant, can sense this, which is why the obsessive desire to censor communications and therefore prevent, or failing that to break up, Right organizing. I doubt if this will work; if history is any guide, the clowns will get taken out easily enough, and also some people who are not clowns, but unstable times call forth hard, determined men who find

each other—and the same technology that can be used to control the Narrative today also enables these men to communicate privately over distance. Now that the Old Pretender, Joe Biden, has taken the title of President and grasped the scepter of power in his trembling hands, even if he has no idea anymore what a scepter is, I suspect there are more than a few such groups forming—probably, crucially, among the military. It's going to be an interesting decade—a prediction that Pliny, or Trajan, would have no difficulty endorsing.

And when things settle down, with our current ruling class reeducated or exiled from the revived America, or the revived sections of America? Well, we'll need a new and improved ruling class—who can learn from the lives of the Plinys how one should act to advance a society. Thus the use of this book, beyond simple interest in the history it competently narrates. You should make your children read it.