Domitian’s Lightning Bolts and Close Shaves in Pliny’s *Epistulae*

Pliny the Younger’s association with the opposition to Domitian has attracted new attention in recent years (Carlon 2009, Sailor 2008). Pliny’s decision to write about the opposition in his letters has generally been interpreted in two ways, which are not mutually exclusive. One motivation for Pliny to write about the opposition is to commemorate the martyrs and preserve their memory, a quasi-historical literary undertaking (Radicke 1997). Another motivation for Pliny to report his associations with the martyrs and participation in the resistance to Domitian is his desire to create a certain image of himself that elides potential negative behavior and highlights laudable actions. Thus, Pliny’s assertions about his involvement with the opposition to Domitian are primarily an act of self-representation (Carlon). While not seeking to deny these motivations, commemoration and self-representation, I would like to consider in this paper Pliny’s recorded experiences as legitimate evidence of the precarious nature of political life under Domitian.

The letters of Pliny provide to scholars an invaluable source on Roman life in the late first century and early second century C.E. They have been put to good use to reconstruct political events, literary culture, family relationships, and economic affairs to name just a few. The letters, of course, have been used to piece together the details of Pliny’s own life, such as his political and literary career, his friendships, and lifestyle. Lacking in all of this is an appreciation for what the letters tell readers about the political life of one senator who lived through Domitian’s reign of terror and survived to record at least parts of the experience.

Pliny’s letters offer a first-hand account of the predicaments facing an ambitious junior senator. Pliny, like many of his colleagues, had to walk a fine line between the need to maintain amicable relations with the *princeps* in order to further his political career or even to survive and the independence needed to honor the ties of *amicitia* with members of the opposition and to preserve one’s own sense of dignity. There are a handful of letters that reveal Pliny’s efforts to maneuver through these shoals.

I will, therefore, be examining Pliny’s personal struggle in five particular areas: public speaking, *amicitia*, political promotion, accusations of treason, and restorative justice. In letter 1.5, Pliny portrays the difficulty of public speaking under Domitian, in this instance in a court of law. Here Pliny records how he avoided making an incriminating statement in the Centumviral Court when Regulus asked his opinion on the exile Mettius Modestus (1.5.5-7). Pliny finds himself in court on this occasion because of the binds of *amicitia*, which is another theme he touches upon in a number of letters, particularly 3.11 and 7.33. In these letters, we see Pliny wrangling with the question of how to proceed when one’s friends run afoul of the regime. If one honors the demands of *amicitia*, such as providing legal defense or monetary assistance, then there is the danger of impeding one’s own political career, which Pliny touches upon in letter 4.24 and in the closing of his *Panegyricus* (95) even. Beyond the possibility of a stymied political career, Pliny reveals the anxieties he had over his own survival. In several letters (3.11, 7.27), Pliny suggests that he too was nearly accused of treason and was saved only by the death of Domitian. Lastly, having survived the reign of Domitian, Pliny was faced with the matter of rehabilitating the reputations of the condemned and exiled, of setting right past wrongs. Thus, in letters 1.5 and 9.13, Pliny records his thoughtful preparations for bringing to justice those responsible for the deaths of his colleagues, specifically Arulenus Rusticus and Helvidius Priscus the Younger.

Clearly, Pliny portrays himself in these letters as acting honorably and with the best of intentions. In this regard, we can read these letters as careful self-representation on Pliny’s part. In addition, Pliny’s admirable depiction of those condemned or exiled under Domitian functions to commemorate their lives. However, if the letters are to be effective as literature, they must speak to the experiences of Pliny’s contemporaries, many of whom must have lived through similar moments of doubt, fear, anger, and even triumph. As such, Pliny’s letters provide readers with an invaluable personal account of political life under Domitian.

Works Cited

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