

The Politics of Publishing Private Letters: Pliny's Construction of Social Capital in *Letters*
10.96-97

In a letter to Trajan, Pliny is the first Latin author, who is not an adherent to the religious group himself, to use the term *christianus*. Consequently, this letter of Pliny (10.96) is often cited by scholars of early Christianity and the New Testament as evidence of the existence of a Christian group and, because of the legal proceedings Pliny describes, mined for proof of the misunderstanding and mistreatment of this group by Romans in positions of power (Aubrion 1989; Corke-Webster 2017). Because the letter is the first of only a few Roman depictions of Christians, it has been analyzed and commented upon a multitude of times, but the scholarly focus has largely centered around reconstructing early Christian lived experience or delineating the Roman laws Pliny employed against them (Sherwin-White 1998).

In this paper, I suggest that this heightened focus on the religious group he mentions has minimized the already subtle constructions of authority and social capital that Pliny builds in this letter. His employment of *exempla*, the display of his rising social status, and his choice of the epistolary genre for this specific appeal to Trajan, all demonstrate a deliberate self-positioning on Pliny's part. Through the published letters in Book 10 I argue, Pliny was able to blur the lines between *otium* and *negotium*, "private" and "public", and so more faithfully represent in a literary form the shift that was occurring in aristocratic activities in the wake of the Emperor's rise. In situating himself as a friend of Trajan, he was attempting to gain power and prestige among the Roman elite who were still trying to work out their own social standing in relation to the Emperor (Roller 1998). After briefly describing the new social hierarchy that was being established in the wake of Augustus, I will discuss the ways in which Pliny's letter 10.96 and its

paired response from Trajan (10.97) exhibit a broad cultural struggle with these fluctuating categories of power.

Works Cited

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