

Pliny the Italian Farmer

One of Younger Pliny's more amusing letters concerns his friend Suetonius' (our familiar Suetonius) desire to purchase a small farm (1.24). What he needs, as Pliny has it, is a scholar's farm: where he can creep around the borders, wear out the pathways, recognize the vines and count the fruit trees. But this is hardly the scale on which Pliny himself manages his farm properties. In this paper I will discuss a little observed side of Pliny: Pliny the farmer. For with all his emphasis on Rome and urban life it is easy to forget his original identity as a Transpadane, born and raised for much of his early life in Como. From this background comes his continuing engagement with agricultural life, an interest he has in common with his uncle. Maintaining Italian possessions and identity was a significant component of Pliny's prestige as a senator and official in Rome. Over 25 of his letters involve farming in one way or another and others his relationships with the communities in which his properties are located. In fact Italy is so much his *patria* that he might have claimed, as famously Cicero did for Rome and Arpinum, the dual citizenship of Como, his native place, and of Rome.

Very relevant to Pliny's engagement in farming is the recent work of social historians who argue the case for the Roman villa as something other than a mere recreational retreat. Even when architectural elegance is at the fore, in the background are crops and produce often supporting the show. No one better describes its integration into dual Italo/Roman lives such as that of Pliny than Nicholas Purcell (1995) who writes on the productivity and prestige of the villa and its beneficiaries (172):

The economic dependence of the Roman consumer on grain for the one, wine for the second and fish for the third has its counterpart in the social relations which result from the success of the senator and his family in gaining office at Rome and in exerting

their new influence in the richest, most populous and most famous parts of Italy.

My discussion will involve three topics: in the first place Pliny's properties and some of their practical considerations; secondly his use of agricultural images as figures of speech in relation to literary production, and finally the donations he makes to Italian communities in which he is a property owner.

Pliny's engagement in farming is vicarious, but also serious. He keeps a close eye on negotiation with tenants and occasionally oversees a harvest. Letter 3.19 shows some of his practical concerns as a proprietor. A farm next to his own properties has come up for sale; he views the pros and cons of a purchase in a letter requesting consultation. Among the advantages for him as a non-resident owner are extending the duties of one and the same official - procurator - who will now be cultivating two villas.

Much of Pliny's planting is in vineyards, notably subject to weather conditions especially in the north. Poor harvest runs thematically through his letters, a circumstance sometimes shared with the correspondents themselves but harvest also furnishes a metaphor for the sum of literary production. In letter 1.20 he compares stylistic variation to variety in sowing and in 7.9 he uses grafting to describe composition. His social donations to territories he patronizes include an *alimenta* and school for Como, an imperial shrine at the place of his Tuscan villa, but with particular relevance to his engagement in agriculture his renovation of a shrine to Ceres that is important for a local festival and a fitting penultimate letter for his final book

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