

Pliny the Younger (c.61 AD - c.113 AD)

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, known as Pliny the Younger, was born into a wealthy family, the son of a landowner from Comum in northern Italy. After his father's death Pliny was brought up by his uncle, Pliny the Elder, the author of a famous encyclopaedia on natural history. Pliny travelled to Rome for the later stages of his education, and later enjoyed a successful career in law and government. Pliny began to practice law at 18 and his reputation in the civil-law courts placed him in demand in the political court that tried provincial officials for extortion. His most notable success (100) was securing condemnation of a governor in Africa and a group of officials from Spain. Meanwhile he had attained the highest administrative posts, becoming a member of the Senate in the 80s, a praetor in 93 and consul in 100, the year he delivered his Panegyricus in honour of the emperor Trajan. His revised and expanded version of this speech is one of the very few surviving Latin speeches that are not by Cicero.

Pliny had financial ability and successively headed the military treasury and the senatorial treasury (94–100). After administering the drainage board of the city of Rome (104–106), he was sent (c. 110) by Emperor Trajan to investigate corruption in the municipal administration of Bithynia, where apparently he died two years later.

Like his contemporary, the historian Tacitus, Pliny was conventional, accepting the Roman Empire, serving under “good” and “bad” emperors, and making the conventional complaints against the latter in his writings. Between 100 and 109 he published nine books of selected, private letters. These first nine books of Pliny's letters, written to friends and colleagues, are formal literary compositions, which set out to give a picture of the times. They cover political events such as senatorial debates, elections and trials as well as social and domestic matters, and also include advice, topographical descriptions and even job references.

Pliny's tenth book of letters consists of letters to and from the emperor Trajan, mostly written during Pliny's governorship. They were not written with an eye to publication, and were probably published after Pliny's death. These letters are carefully written, occasional letters on diverse topics. Each holds an item of recent social, literary, political, or domestic news, or sometimes an account of an earlier but contemporary historical event, or else initiates moral discussion of a problem. Each has a single subject and is written in a style that mixes, in Pliny's terminology, the historical, the poetical, and the oratorical manner, to fit the theme. The composition of these *litterae curiosius scriptae* (“letters written with special care”) was a fashion among the wealthy, and Pliny developed it into a miniature art form.

Pliny's letters introduce many of the leading figures of Roman society in the 12 years after the death of Domitian—men of letters, politicians, administrators, generals, and rising young men of rank. They make possible the social reconstruction of an age for which there is otherwise no serious historical record. He was adept at brief character sketches, his works being less satirical, more kindly, and possibly more complete than those of Tacitus. He was also a devotee of literature.

His letters to his fellow advocate Tacitus, then occupied with his first major work, tell the little that is known about the date and circumstances of the composition of the *Historiae*, to which Pliny contributed his famous account of the eruption of Vesuvius. The biographer Suetonius was among his protégés.

Pliny is thought to have died c. 113 in Bithynia-Pontus, Asia Minor [present day Turkey] in around 113 AD.