

## MACER'S VILLA – A PREVIOUS OWNER: PLINY, *EP.* 5. 18

At Pliny, *Ep.* 5. 18 we read that Macer, the recipient of that letter, has a villa which Pliny says must be lovely, because *in qua* [*sc. villa*] *se composuerat homo felicior, antequam felicissimus fieret*. The identity of this *homo felicior* is undoubtedly of some interest, but the latest commentary on Pliny's *Letters* (that of A. N. Sherwin-White) has nothing to say on the matter. However, B. Radice in her two translations of the *Letters* (Loeb and Penguin eds.) says that the person in question is Nerva, but adds as a second possibility 'the dictator Sulla'.<sup>1</sup> In this ambivalence she is at one with many of the older commentators on the *Letters*.<sup>2</sup> Alone among the commentators examined by us, M. Gesner (following Cortius) elects to give preference to Sulla over Nerva.<sup>3</sup> We believe Sulla is certainly the owner in question, but since the ambiguity persists in the scholarly tradition, a fresh look should be taken at the problem and the case against Nerva and for Sulla be put more fully than hitherto.

In using the phrase *homo felicior, antequam felicissimus fieret* without actually naming the person, it is clear that Pliny takes it for granted that the individual in question will be immediately recognizable to Macer, the recipient of the letter, by this description. It follows, therefore, that the phrase had become well established as a commonplace, inevitably and unambiguously linked to one person only. All of our evidence suggests that it cannot be applied to Nerva. First of all it is likely that such a phrase would need time to become accepted into the tradition so as to become readily identifiable, whereas Pliny was writing only a relatively short time after Nerva's reign.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, however, Pliny was talking of a man who was happier as a private citizen than when he became supreme ruler. And this does not apply to Nerva. From what we know of his life he was anything but *felix* before he became emperor. For according to Dio, 67. 15. 5–6, he fell under the suspicion of Domitian, because it was foretold by a soothsayer that he would one day be ruler, and as a result lived in peril of his life. Indeed Philostratus goes so far as to say that he was sent into exile to Tarentum by Domitian.<sup>5</sup> However, the strongest argument for rejecting Nerva is the fact that nowhere in our sources is such a phrase or anything resembling it applied to him. True, some scholars in retrospect may see his reign as unhappy,<sup>6</sup> but there is no evidence to suggest that the ancients regarded it in such a light.<sup>7</sup> Nerva must therefore be excluded from our reckoning.

The case for Sulla is on the contrary a very attractive one. Our ancient sources are in agreement that he was a model of decency until he became dictator, when he is generally portrayed as a monster of cruelty.<sup>8</sup> It was precisely at this latter period that

<sup>1</sup> cf. *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 154 n. 1; idem, *Pliny: Letters and Panegyricus* 1 (London, 1969), p. 384 n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> cf. e.g. L. de Sacy, *Lettres de Pline* (revised J. Pierrot) 1 (Paris, 1832), p. 461 n. 239; J. D. Lewis, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (London, 1879), p. 173 n.

<sup>3</sup> *C. Plinii C.S. Epistolarum Libri Decem* (Leipzig, 1805), p. 287 n.

<sup>4</sup> For the chronology of *Ep.* 5. 18 v. Sherwin-White, ad loc.

<sup>5</sup> *Vit. Apoll.* 7. 8.

<sup>6</sup> cf. e.g. R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1939), p. 518.

<sup>7</sup> cf. e.g. Tac. *Agr.* 3 with remarks of A. Garzetti, *From Tiberius to the Antonines* (London, 1974), p. 307.

<sup>8</sup> cf. e.g. Vell. Pat. 2. 25. 3; Sall. *Jug.* 95; Dio, *fr.* 109. 1–3; Plut. *Sull.* 30. 6–7.

he assumed the name *Felix* and believed himself that he had reached the peak of his felicity.<sup>1</sup> The Romans, however, believed that *felicitas est fortuna adjuatrix conciliorum bonorum*,<sup>2</sup> and seeing the cruelty of his dictatorship questioned his right to assume the title *Felix*. Consequently, men felt that he was only truly *felix* up to the time of his assumption of the title.<sup>3</sup> Thus Sallust, *Jug.* 95, says *felicissimo omnium ante civilem victoriam* and in Vell. Pat. 2. 27. 5 we read *Felicitis nomen adsumpsit, quod quidem usurpasset iustissime, si eundem et vincendi et vivendi finem habuisset*. It is clear that the phrase in Pliny closely resembles what we find in these two passages. There is evidence to indicate that this notion of Sulla as a man who was *felix* until he assumed the actual title, but an unworthy holder of it afterwards, continued on down to Pliny's own times. Thus e.g. Seneca, *Cons. ad Marc.* 12, exclaims *deorum illud crimen erat Sulla tam felix*, and Pliny the Elder, *N.H.* 7. 137–8 in the course of a long tirade against Sulla says *unus hominum ad hoc aevi Felicitis sibi cognomen adseruit L. Sulla, civili nempe sanguine ac patriae oppugnatione adoptatus... o prava interpretatio et futuro tempore infelix!* It seems clear, then, that Pliny the Younger is describing Sulla in terms which had become long established in the Roman rhetorical tradition and which were familiar to his uncle and to Macer.<sup>4</sup>

Finally we might add that the tone of Pliny's letter (which stresses the positive aspects of the villa) and in particular the use of the word 'antequam', suggest that the house in question was not used by Sulla after he became dictator. If this is correct, then we are not dealing with the famous villa at Puteoli (*De Vir. Illust.* 75) in which he wrote his memoirs and died,<sup>5</sup> but another one of his properties.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Vell. Pat. 2. 27. 5; *De Vir. Illust.* 75. 9; Plut. *Sull.* 37. 1–4.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Cic. *Ad. Corn. Nep.* fr. 2. 5.

<sup>3</sup> On all of this see further H. Ericsson, 'Sulla Felix', *Eranos* 41 (1943), 84–7.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Sulla figures as a topic for rhetorical discussion in the schools, cf. *Juv. Sat.* 1. 16; Quint. *Inst. Or.* 3. 8. 53; 5. 10. 71.

<sup>5</sup> As Gesner thought (*loc. cit.*).

<sup>6</sup> For Sulla's other properties see Plut. *Sull.* 22. 2.