

THE DATING OF PLINY'S LATEST LETTERS

I

When announcing the first instalment, the author made a firm declaration: 'collegi non servato temporis ordine'. The note of elegant disdain suitably echoes a poet: 'postmodo collectas, utcumque sine ordine iunctas'.¹ In fact, care for balance and variety predominates.

Nevertheless, when Pliny came to recount public transactions, he had to respect a 'temporis ordo', as many signs indicate. Mommsen in his classic study was able to work out the chronological framework, of the nine books, from 97 to 108 or 109.² In general, his scheme stands the test – that is, apart from the notion of a rapid publication in separate books. Indeed, no argument avails to prove that the first instalment saw the light of day earlier than the end of the year 105.

Pliny was expert in finance and an alert contriver everywhere. Persons of that quality may succumb to inadvertence, although not very often. Licinius Nepos, praetor in 105, comes twice into action (4.29; 5.4), before his edict gets a mention (5.9). Again, in a letter the context of which points to 105, a consulship for Minicius Fundanus is divined 'in proximum annum' (4.15.5). Fundanus entered office in the early summer of 107.³ By contrast, Valerius Paulinus, consul suffect in the pair that followed that consulship, does not come up until 9.37.⁴ An extremely late point in the collection. It imposes a salutary warning when a number of letters in the final triad are put under scrutiny.

The exposition of Mommsen ran into criticism, sometimes hasty or even perverse. Moreover, various attempts were made to modify the dates of certain prosecutions in the Senate.⁵ The emergence of a consul on the *Fasti Ostienses* demolished an elaborate reconstruction that concerned two proconsuls of Bithynia.⁶ More accruing, a number of fairly close dates can now be established.

The most cursory of readers cannot fail to notice a declension in the letters well before the end. A dearth of exciting themes becomes evident. On the contrary, and especially in the last book, some short notes of slight consequence. That addressed to the obscure Cornelius Titianus (9.33) is conspicuous for bland vacuity. He had not been heard of since 1.7. Several other nonentities now make a first and solitary appearance.⁷

Running short of material, the author also had recourse to earlier pieces. The phenomena combine and concord.⁸ That being so, most of Books VIII and IX defies close datings.

¹ Ov. *Ex Ponto* 3.9.53.

² Mommsen, *Hermes* 3 (1869), 31 ff. = *Ges. Schriften* iv (1906), 366 ff.

³ For consular dates see L. Vidman, *Fasti Ostienses*² (Prague, 1982).

⁴ With an explicit reference to 'Kalendae' (i.e. September 1); cf. below.

⁵ Viz. the prosecutions of Julius Bassus and Varenus Rufus.

⁶ Acilius Rufus, the 'consul designatus' of 5.20.6, was identified as 'Rufus', the first 'suffectus' of 107 (*AE* 1945, 35) – as then appeared certain. The consequences for recent theses of A. v. Premerstein were briefly drawn in *JRS* 36 (1946), 163 = *Danubian Papers* (1971), 166. Still valid, although the identity will be disputed in this paper.

⁷ Viz. Colonus (9.9), Venator (20), Sabinianus (21), Rusticus (29), Sardus (31), Mustius (39).

⁸ See the full and careful analysis of A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny. A Historical and Social Commentary* (1966), 39 ff.

There stood a precise and precious exception, apparent long since. Pliny records the death of the young Junius Avitus (8.23). His name occurred on the long list of minor legatees on the Testamentum Dasumii.⁹ That ample and portentous document was drawn up in the summer of 108, during the consulate of P. Aelius Hadrianus and M. Trebatius Priscus: from 1 May to 31 August. The item duly attracted Mommsen, when he was editing the Corpus. On a cautious assessment, the Plinian letter about Junius Avitus still holds eminent rank as providing the latest date in the correspondence.¹⁰

II

In epigraphy a single discovery or a drastic revision can strike a sharp and sudden blow. That fate befalls the Testamentum Dasumii. With the efflux of time the testator annexed an identity, viz. L. Dasumius Hadrianus, a senator from Baetica, consul suffect in 93, proconsul of Asia in 106.¹¹ Further, equipped with a suitable son by adoption: P. Dasumius Rusticus, who shared the *fascēs* with the Emperor Hadrian in 119.

Identities remain intact, but Dasumii now forfeit the Testamentum. A new fragment came to light that fitted on to one side of the text.¹² Combined therewith and neatly interpreted, the results disallowed Dasumius and issued in an Ignotus.¹³

An attractive name was awaiting a sponsor, none other than the opulent Narbonensian Cn. Domitius Tullus, consul suffect for the second time in 98, in succession to the Emperor Nerva. A familiar letter of Pliny, and by most much admired, recounted the will of Tullus (8.18). The identity evokes brief but satisfactory recognition.¹⁴ It wins support.¹⁵ No impediment is in sight. The ramifications are wide and noteworthy.¹⁶

The Plinian letter had previously been assigned to the vicinity of 106 or 107.¹⁷ Or better, to either 107 or 108.¹⁸ The new identity of the testator puts the death of Domitius Tullus either in the summer of 108 when the will was drawn up (assuming an almost instant decease), or some time later. How much later, that is a question. Pliny was writing from Rome; an absence either in the summer or in the autumn might come into the count. A fresh inspection of Books VII–IX cannot be evaded.¹⁹

III

In the dearth of clear indications, it becomes expedient to investigate Pliny's absences. Not all of the letters in question conform to a strict order in time. That may vex the enquirer; it was not required for Pliny's readers. Although it may appear pedantic

⁹ *CIL* 6.10299; Bruns, *Fontes*⁷ (1909), no. 117; Arangio-Ruiz, *FIR* (1943), no. 48.

¹⁰ Sherwin-White, op. cit. 38: 'not earlier than the first quarter of 108, which is the latest date in the letters'.

¹¹ *PIR*², D 13 f. (with the Addendum, p. xi). Further developed in *JRS* 43 (1953), 156 = *Roman Papers* (1979), 245.

¹² *AE* 1976, 77.

¹³ W. Eck, *ZPE* 30 (1978), 277 ff.

¹⁴ Carmen Castillo García, *Actas del I. Congreso Andaluz de Estudios Clásicos* (Jaén, 1982), 159 ff.

¹⁵ 'The Testamentum Dasumii. Some Novelties', *Chiron* 15 (1985), forthcoming. Contributions are to be expected from others, given the importance of document and theme.

¹⁶ Notably for the Hispano-Narbonensian ancestry of the Antonine dynasty. The heiress Domitia Cn. f. Lucilla was the maternal grandmother of Marcus Aurelius.

¹⁷ *PIR*², D 167; 'circa annum 106/7'.

¹⁸ Thus *HSCP* 82 (1979), 305 = *RP* 3 (1984), 1174.

¹⁹ For chronology and analysis of the contents, Sherwin-White, op. cit. 37 ff.

to search for what the author did not bother about, it may be useful to set out the items in one place.

By way of preface, a brief excursus on Comum is requisite. A journey to the distant 'patria' in 104 appears beyond dispute.²⁰ In the first letter of Book IV Pliny announced it conspicuously to Calpurnius Fabatus, who was yearning to see 'post longum tempus' his granddaughter and her husband. Several references turn up in the sequel.²¹

While at Comum Pliny learned that Cornutus Tertullus had been accorded the charge of the Via Aemilia. A piece of news most gratifying, since it brought parity with the friend and colleague. Pliny himself held an 'officium' (5.14.2). That is, the curatorship of the Tiber, alluded to again, and once only: 'distringor officio' (7.15.1).²² There is no sign, by the way, that a metropolitan post of this kind normally entailed much expense of time or labour, although Pliny had to request leave from the Princes (14.9).

A second visit to the 'patria' not long afterwards had been surmised.²³ It falls short of proof, it lacks direct and certain attestation – and it is not needed. Similarly, it will be convenient to segregate a short excursion to Campania in the course of 106 (6.28.1; 30.2).

The present venture in clarification covers the years from 105 to 108 – and it will extend to 109. Pliny went several times to the estate he calls 'Tusci'. It was situated near Tifernum Tiberinum (in Regio VI, otherwise Umbria according to the Augustan demarcation); and it was not much more than a hundred and fifty miles from Rome.²⁴ Pliny's visits fell in summer (it will be noted) as well as in autumn.²⁵ By established custom the Senate went into recess for September and October.²⁶ When prefect in charge of the Aerarium Saturni in 98, Pliny requested leave of absence from Trajan. He reminded the Emperor that September was full of holidays (10.8.3).

IV

First of all, in 105 Pliny was at Rome in the spring. The praetorship of Licinius Nepos indicates the year (5.4), and a letter about the same transaction shows Afranius Dexter as 'consul designatus' (5.13.4). That is, anterior to 1 May 105.

Pliny proposed to visit 'Tuscos meos' in the course of the summer. Apprised of which, Domitius Apollinaris, a consular friend from Vercellae in Transpadana, evinced some alarm. Pliny reassured him, vouching for the especial salubrity of site and region (5.6.1 ff., cf. 45 f.). He duly went to Tifernum, perhaps for a fairly long stay. It extended into the hunting season: 'ego in Tusci et venor et studeo' (5.18.2).

In 106 no journey northwards can be discovered. None at least for the summer,

²⁰ Sherwin-White, *op. cit.* 264 (on 4.1): 'the book-date, which would give summer 104'. Observe, however, 345 (on 5.14.8): 'in perhaps 104'.

²¹ Viz. 4.13.3; 30.1; 5.14.1; 6.1.1; 24.2.

²² Advance news of the appointment may explain 'officii ratio' (3.6.6), referring to a projected journey to Comum. The post is duly registered on the inscription (*ILS* 2927). For the duration of the mandate, observe that Pliny's predecessor Julius Ferox is attested both in 101 and in 103 (*CIL* 6.31549 f.).

²³ Thus Sherwin-White, *op. cit.* 345 (on 5.14.8): 'separating a visit to Comum in perhaps 104 from a second visit c. 106'. Cf. also 343: 'one or two summers later'. And elsewhere.

²⁴ As Pliny affirmed to Trajan in 98 (10.8.6).

²⁵ Certain for the summer of 105 (5.6) and of 107 (8.1.1, cf. 9.37.1). The letter describing how he passed his days there (9.36) cannot be fixed to any single year. To Tifernum, Pliny may have paid more visits than can be established. Distant Comum is another matter.

²⁶ Suet. *Aug.* 35.3.

and the autumn seems precluded by the prosecution of Varenus Rufus, when Pliny acted for the defence. Reported in five letters, the case was to go on for a long time, and the initial proceedings (the 'inquisitio') may have begun well before the end of the year. In the first letter Acilius Rufus is styled 'consul designatus' (5.20.6). On the *Fasti Ostienses* stands, as the first 'suffectus' of 107, 'L. Acilius] Rufu[s]'.²⁷

The supplement has not so far been contested. Reflection counsels disquiet. L. Acilius Rufus is an obscure senator from Sicily. The Rufus who stepped into the place vacated by Licinius Sura, consul for the third time, and continued as colleague to Sosius Senecio (*cos. II*), ought to be a person of note and consequence; and his identity becomes a problem. If that objection is held valid, Acilius Rufus was consul suffect towards the end of 106.²⁸

However that may be, the second letter is decisive. Time had elapsed, since witnesses had to be summoned from Bithynia. Yet Juvenius Celsus was still praetor (6.5.4). Clearly a praetor of 106, since he was in altercation with Licinius Nepos, no longer holding the office.

V

Second, in 107 Pliny made the summer journey reasonably well ('commode'), although some of his freedmen and slaves were afflicted 'ferventissimis aestibus' (8.1.1, cf. 26.1). Agrarian business is described (2.1. ff.). He had passed by way of the spring of Clitumnus (8.6), in Umbria.

A precious detail emerges at a much later stage. Pliny was not intending to return to the capital fairly soon. Writing to Valerius Paulinus, he says 'nisi te Kalendis statim consullem videro' (9.37.1); and he concluded with 'vides quam non delicata me causa obire primum consulatus tui diem non sinat' (37.5). Paulinus entered office on the first day of September 107.

Several other letters in Books VIII and IX might be attributed (such is the nature of the evidence) to this occasion.²⁹ But there is also the autumn of 108, and of 109. For most of them, it cannot matter much.

However, Pliny was back at Rome at the time of the vintage. In answer to Terentius Junior, who reported 'gracilis istic vindemias', Pliny stated 'eadem ex meis agellis nuntiantur' (8.15.2). He had recently made the delightful acquaintance of Terentius Junior, an erudite ex-procurator who preferred 'tranquillissimum otium' to the career of honours (7.25). Terentius' estate was not far away, in the territory of Perusia.³⁰

²⁷ No doubts in L. Vidman, *op. cit.* 47. In *PIR*², A 78 the consul suffect in Pliny had already been identified as L. Acilius L. f. Quir. Rufus, a senator of praetorian rank (*CIL* 10.7344: *Thermae Himeracae*). He entered the Senate without having held a military tribunate or minor magistracy, therefore was probably not the son of a senator. Furthermore, after the praetorship Acilius Rufus was a *praefectus frumenti dandi*. Not at all a promising sign; cf. W. Eck, *ANRW* 2.1 (1974), 192 f.

²⁸ Consequences ensue for dating the prosecution of Varenus Rufus. See further 'Superior Suffect Consuls', *ZPE* (1985), forthcoming. To this category belong, in their different fashions, Attius Suburanus (101), Fabius Justus (102), Cornelius Dolabella (113).

²⁹ Sherwin-White is disposed thus to assign no fewer than nine letters of Book IX (*op. cit.* 40), viz. 9.10, 15, 16, 20, 25, 28, 36, 37, 40.

³⁰ *ILS* 6120, cf. A. Stein, *RE VA*, 663 ff.

VI

Third, in 108. This time Pliny took the opportunity to inspect the 'Amerina praedia' of Calpurnius Fabatus, and was able to render a picturesque account of Lake Vadimo (8.23): a pendant to Clitumnus, of the previous year (8.6).³¹

A letter to Pompeius Falco offers a valuable sign (9.15). It opens with 'refugeram in Tuscos'. In conclusion, the author asks Falco to keep on informing him about transactions at the capital: 'tu consuetudinem serva, nobisque sic rusticis urbana acta perscribe' (15.3).

Now Falco was the second of the second pair of consuls suffect in 108. On the *Fasti Ostienses* is registered

K. Sept. Q. Pompel[jus] F[alco].

About the supplement of the name, no reason for hesitation.³² Therefore a sojourn at Tifernum in the autumn of the year, with Pliny delicately alluding to the consulship of his friend.³³ If the dating were disallowed, let alternatives be canvassed. In 107 Falco (none doubt) was still in Judaea, and also recipient of the petition of a tribunate for Cornelius Minicianus (7.22). There remains 109: for the sake of argument, and for nothing else.

The month in which Falco took office may, however, admit a slight hesitation. September is assumed in confidence.³⁴ Another pair of 'suffecti' might have to be lodged in this year, following Falco and his missing colleague.³⁵

That would not make much difference. Nor need it be supposed that Falco held the *fascēs* in absence.³⁶ An autumn journey in 108 still subsists. As is agreed, Pliny's letter about the death of Junius Avitus (8.23) acquired an approximate date from Avitus' name on the Testamentum Dasumii (drawn up in the summer of 108). Pliny, mentioning the bereaved family, states that he was 'absens' when apprised of the melancholy tidings (23.8).³⁷

For the placing of the letter, some might be tempted to observe the next (8.24). It conveys advice to Maximus, appointed 'corrector' of the free cities in the province Achaia. He made the journey in the winter season.³⁸ That letter also may belong to the autumn of 108 – not that the juxtaposition itself is any kind of proof.³⁹

VII

Sharp repercussions can no longer be deferred, issuing from the new occupant of the Testamentum Dasumii. On any count, the letter Pliny devoted to the will of Domitius Tullus (8.18) cannot belong earlier than the summer of 108. The aged put off decisions, and the device of 'testamentary adoption' had a congenial appeal. The orator

³¹ i.e. unless the author has artistically disjoined the two occasions.

³² Some uncertainty is perceptible in Sherwin-White, *op. cit.* 40, cf. 499 f. (on 9.15). Not justifiable.

³³ Cf. 'istas occupationes' in 7.12.5. To a Minicius: that is, Fundanus, consul suffect in the summer of 107.

³⁴ L. Vidman, *op. cit.* 103, citing Groag and Degraasi.

³⁵ Rex Alexander, one of the consular cousins of Julius Severus (OGIS 522: Ancyra), might go in this year. Likewise perhaps Bellicius Sollers, a 'vir praetorius' in 5.4.1: attested as a consul by *ILS* 1031 (Verona). Ti. Claudius Atticus is also to be considered (*PIR*², C 801).

³⁶ Thus A. R. Birley, *The Fasti of Roman Britain* (1981), 99, doubting the inference from 9.15.3.

³⁷ The word lacks annotation in Sherwin-White, *ad loc.*

³⁸ Arrian, *Diss. Epicteti* 3.7.

³⁹ The appointment was put in 108 in *Tacitus* (1958), 80.

Domitius Afer of Nemausus, whose testament (going eighteen years back) adopted the Curvii brothers, forgot to change it, after dissidence supervened (18.5). His heir Domitius Tullus (although an acute man of business) may have postponed for a different reason, waiting until extinction declared its imminence.

The death of Tullus might fall in the summer, before Pliny's departure from Rome for the journey attested by the word 'absens' in the letter about Junius Avitus (23.8). Or, on the other hand, after his return. Perhaps in the winter of 108/9.

The will excited enormous interest. As Pliny says, 'sunt omnes fabulae Tullus' (8.18.11). The crafty Tullus, having deceived a pack of 'captatores', left the bulk of his fortune to the niece and adoptive daughter. He also made handsome provision for the relict, herself a widow when she married him, an action not to her credit but earning redemption by the care she devoted to Tullus in his decrepitude, which the author against his habit depicts with gruesome precision (18.8 f.).⁴⁰

No names, nor is the husband of Domitia Cn. f. Lucilla even mentioned, who was enjoined to take his name: 'nomejn meum laturum'.⁴¹ He is P. Calvisius Ruso.⁴² In consequence he became polyonymous. He might have been styled 'Cn. Domitius Tullus P. Calvisius Ruso' or 'Cn. Domitius Tullus Ruso'. On the Fasti Ostienses he stands as P. Calvisius Tullus, opening the year 109.⁴³ No clue, however, to the date of Tullus' decease. The annual chronicle would not be inscribed until the year ended.

VIII

A different kind of clue offers, albeit hazardous. The letter that precedes, written to a Transpadane friend, described in vivid and ample language continual deluges of rain and a vast inundation caused by the Tiber.⁴⁴

For reciprocal instruction should be invoked the devastating flood in the autumn of 54 B.C. It brought a 'mira proluvies'. The waters reached the ancient Piscina Publica and a shrine of Mars near the Porta Capena, whence issued the Via Appia.⁴⁵

Writing in November, Cicero was happy to bring that calamity into relation with the scandalous acquittal of the proconsul Gabinius. It occurred on or about 23 October.

The inundation was also a portent of gravity and alarm, as annalists did not fail to chronicle, since that year marked the seven hundredth anniversary of the city.⁴⁶ Furthermore, a great and savage conflagration.⁴⁷

A suitable comparison will adduce an eloquent ode of Horace (1.2).⁴⁸ Or an incident of A.D. 15: 'continuis imbris auctus Tiberis plana urbis stagnaverat' (*Ann.* 1.76.1).

⁴⁰ With echoes in Juvenal 10.228 ff., as argued in *AJP* 100 (1979), 253 f. = *Roman Papers* 3 (1984), 1137 f.

⁴¹ *CIL* 6.10229, line 4.

⁴² The consul of 109, son of P. Calvisius Ruso Julius Frontinus (*PIR*², C 350). The latter, it is argued, can be disjoined from P. Calvisius Ruso (suff. 79). See 'P. Calvisius Ruso, One Person or Two', *ZPE* 56 (1984), 173 ff. Furthermore, the consul of 109 (and not the Cremutius Ruso of 6.23.2) should have the letter about Julius Frontinus (9.19).

⁴³ When abridged on the Fasti, polyonymous consuls normally register the paternal name. On which, *Epigrafia e Ordine Senatorio* 1 (1982), 397 ff.

⁴⁴ 8.23. To (Caecilius) Macrinus. Although the nomenclature is so indistinctive, the curious will note T. Caecilius Macrinus, whose wife's mother was honoured at Mediolanum (*CIL* 5.5842).

⁴⁵ *Ad Q. Fratrem* 3.5.8: 'Romae et maxime in Appia ad Martis mira proluvies; Crassipedis ambulatio ablata, horti, tabernae plurimae; magna vis aquae usque ad piscinam publicam'.

⁴⁶ Dio 39.61 (at the beginning of the year).

⁴⁷ Orosius 6.14.5. Orosius missed the flood, Dio the fire.

⁴⁸ See the ample commentary of Nisbet and Hubbard (1970), 16 ff.

Asinius Gallus rose to the occasion. He opined that the sacred books of the Sibyl be consulted. One of the *quindecimviri* for more than thirty years, Gallus was perhaps aware that nothing propitious for a new reign was likely to emerge.⁴⁹ Tiberius refused.

Modest curiosity will turn to the incidence of heavy rainfall and high water on the river. Figures are available for a recent period. They declare the highest frequency in November and December, but January not much abating.⁵⁰ The winter of 108/9 is the plausible epoch for the floods that Pliny witnessed and described.

IX

Pliny's Book VIII fails to carry other events of public notoriety. In the person of Tullus persisted the senior 'bis consul'. Arrius Antoninus and Vestricius Spurinna ('consules iterum' in 97 and in 98) had received missives as recently as 105.⁵¹ Both may meanwhile have passed away. Each having already had adequate portrayal, no call subsisted for a necrological notice.⁵² Pliny (it may be surmised) refrained from including letters addressed to friends now deceased when he put forth his selection.⁵³

In fact, illnesses and deaths seem to pile up in the period covered by Books VII and VIII. A sequence of unhealthy seasons is the explanation (torrid weather helping, at least in 107, cf. 8.1.1), or an epidemic supervening in the train of the second war against the Dacians.⁵⁴ Parallel visitations can be suspected about eighteen years previously under Domitian – and likewise a decade later, after the failed adventure in Mesopotamia.

Of Licinius Sura, consul for the third time in 107, outdistancing Julius Servianus, no trace is discoverable later than the summer of the next year. To the consul Aelius Hadrianus, Sura made a portentous disclosure about Trajan's designs for his benefit.⁵⁵ The suspect item derives ultimately from an apologia, from the autobiography of Trajan's successor, such is the rational conjecture.

If that year witnessed Sura's end, the men of mature understanding congregated at the funeral of Domitius Tullus had rich material for a damaging comparison: each of rank and fame, but of diverse report.

On the argument preceding, the death of Tullus is assigned to the winter of 108/9. Like the Tiber flood, it was a public event. The juxtaposition of the letters is artistic, supplying variety and a contrast. It may be more than that: a convenient and unobtrusive reminder both for spectators and for readers in the near future. Chroniclers of Trajan's reign were not likely to emerge for some time.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ On the other side, the inundation in January of 27 was duly interpreted as providential and instant recognition of the name 'Augustus' (Dio 53.23.1).

⁵⁰ The incidence of high water along Ripetta for the period 1870–1930 is furnished by J. Le Gall, *Le Tibre dans l'Antiquité* (1953), 15. As follows: October, 1; November, 10; December, 12; January, 8; February, 5; March, 4. The highest rainfall occurs in the last three months of the year. For detailed reference to some historic floods, Nisbet and Hubbard, op. cit. 24 f., citing S. A. Smith, *The Tiber and its Tributaries* (1877).

⁵¹ 5.15; 17.

⁵² Such as the brief biography appended to the illness of Fannia, the daughter of Thrasea Paetus (7.19).

⁵³ Julius Frontinus died in 103 or 104. Pliny succeeded to his augurship (4.8.3).

⁵⁴ See further *Some Arval Brethren* (1980), ch. vii, 'Mortality at Rome'.

⁵⁵ *HA, Hadr.* 3.10: 'ut a Sura comperit adoptandum se a Traiano esse'.

⁵⁶ Despite the polite and innocuous profession 'senectuti seposui' (Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.1.4).

X

When a letter in Book VIII can be assigned without discomfort to 108/9, it becomes legitimate to ask whether other items (and especially a number in the next book) may not be attributed to the year 109. That notion demands a candid avowal. The composition and contents of Book IX being what they are, the letters in question could not be refused to 108, or even to 107.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, a last journey to Tifernum is not excluded, in the autumn of 109.

Writing to the army commander Mamilianus, Pliny confesses a double disinclination to go hunting: 'non vacat quia vindemiae in manibus, non libet quia exiguae' (9.16.1). One observes, however, that the letter preceding, to Pompeius Falco, claims for certainty the autumn of 108 (discussed above).

Next, to the obscure Venator: the vintage is meagre, yet better than Pliny expected (9.20.2). Once again, caution is in place. Like trouble with tenants and contractors, complaints about the vintage are not likely to be the monopoly of any one year.⁵⁸

XI

Another path opens. In sundry earlier letters Pliny issued admonitions to certain friends who were reluctant to publish. He was insistent to remind them of 'mortalitas'.⁵⁹ In Book IX the preoccupation with fame, never absent, becomes urgent. Thus the explicit recurrence of Verginius Rufus (9.19; cf. 6.10). The author even included a letter of ostensible modesty to a man who was 'percopiosus' in the book he wrote about Pliny (9.31).⁶⁰

Two letters to Tacitus occur. The first shows Pliny hunting (9.20). That is, at Tifernum. Fame and posterity is the subject of the other (9.14). It follows the long account of Pliny's signal exploit in 97, namely the avenging of Helvidius Priscus (9.13). Perhaps to be added is the recitation of a 'verissimus liber' by an unnamed historian. On anxious entreaty he consented to leave out a passage for the moment, but not from the text (9.27). Finally, the Roman knight at the games, who after getting a slightly evasive answer to a question, went on to ask 'Tacitus es an Plinius?' (9.23.3). On which a pertinent observation is in place: the author may have been saving up these items for his concluding book.

Most estimates put the termination of the *Historiae* in or about the year 109. The season called for Pliny to round off and give to the world the final instalment of an orator's added contribution to parity of renown: in short, an autobiography disguised as running comment on life and letters.

XII

In Book IX one missive stands out from the pervasive mediocrity: Pliny to Voconius Romanus, his old friend, junior by not many years (9.28). It demands exacting scrutiny. After a long interval had elapsed Pliny received three letters all at once. That detail perhaps points to residence at Tifernum rather than at Rome. No matter. The first letter of Voconius referred to the vintage: 'modicas te vindemias collegisse'. The

⁵⁷ Cf. Sherwin-White, *op. cit.* 40.

⁵⁸ Thus the remarks about the vintage in 8.15 (to Terentius Junior): assigned to 107.

⁵⁹ E.g. 2.10 (Octavius Rufus, a poet); 5.5.7 (Novius Maximus, cf. the Maximus of 9.1).

⁶⁰ This person, Sardus, is perhaps not wholly a nonentity; cf. the Asconius Sardus of *ILS* 6692 (Patavium). On whom see further *PBSR* 51 (1983), 109 f.

same, so Pliny adds, had been his own lot, 'quamquam in diversissima parte terrarum'.⁶¹

The second imports a revelation. Voconius, so he promised, was ready to take wing and join Pliny, on receipt of precise information: 'cum certius de vitae nostrae ordinatione aliquid audieris' (28.4). Pliny makes a firm response. He is devising fetters, not in any way to be broken: 'iam tibi compedes nectimus, quas perfringere nullo modo possis'.

Saguntum harboured Voconius, sedentary for a decade (six other letters since 97). A sharp question applies. Of what nature is the change in Pliny's 'ordinatio vitae' that could impel Voconius to abandon patrimony and 'patria' and the life of leisure?⁶² Hardly a mere private or personal matter. That is not the attachment which 'compedes' denotes: a strong word, and binding.

The solution is easy. In the past Pliny had been eager to do something for the friend. He asked Priscus, an army commander, to provide a tribunate (2.13). To no known result. This time he wanted Voconius to join his staff. The appointment to Bithynia is the new turn in Pliny's existence.⁶³

Neither post is named. That is Pliny's way, elsewhere on ample show. Nor can it be taken for certain that Voconius redeemed his promise and embarked on the arduous journey. That his name should be absent from the governor's correspondence with Trajan is not an argument. Pliny sent a petition on behalf of Suetonius Tranquillus (10.97). He might well hesitate to obtrude the other person.⁶⁴

It is appropriate that a veiled allusion to the Bithynian appointment should be slipped into Book IX. Not at the very end. That would confer undue emphasis. Once again, not Pliny's fashion. Pliny chose a tranquil termination. To the young aristocrat Pedanius Fuscus he had recently given a full account of how he spent the day 'in Tuscis' during the summer (9.36). Pliny now tells Fuscus about the disposition of his 'otium' at Laurentum close to Rome: in the winter (9.40).⁶⁵

XIII

Pliny reached his province in the month of September. The dispatches to Trajan lapse soon after the beginning of the third (i.e. calendar) year. The initial year, that is the question. Following Mommsen, many were satisfied with 111. The sagacious Mommsen only said 'etwa 111'.⁶⁶ Others have suggested 109 or 110.⁶⁷

For 109 a firm preference has been expressed in the standard commentary. The argument runs as follows. The two new year congratulations sent by Pliny during his tenure of the province (10.35; 100) carry no reference to the consulate which the Emperor assumed in 112, for the first time since 103. That rules out 110, so it is affirmed.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Decisive not for the date, it is true, but for Saguntum.

⁶² In fact Voconius was patently an Epicurean. He requested Pliny to forward a letter to Plotina (28.1).

⁶³ Thus in *Tacitus* (1958), 80 f., cf. 659. More fully in *Historia* 9 (1960), 366 = *RP* (1979), 481. Not, however, conceded by Sherwin-White, op. cit. 511 (on 9.28.4).

⁶⁴ A decade earlier Pliny had requested Trajan to adlect his friend 'in amplissimum ordinem' (10.4). No sign that Caesar complied.

⁶⁵ On the present hypothesis, the winter of 109/110.

⁶⁶ Mommsen, op. cit. 393.

⁶⁷ E.g. 'possibly as early as 109, perhaps rather in 110' (*Historia* 9 (1960), 366 = *RP* (1979), 481, cf. *Hermes* 109 (1981), 106 = *RP* 3 (1984), 1339).

⁶⁸ Sherwin-White, op. cit. 81: 'this should fix Pliny's years to 109-11'.

The validity of arguments from silence varies enormously. Silence can sometimes be valuable, as when it helps to circumscribe the 'circle of Pliny' by invoking categories of persons who receive no letters. In this instance, doubts have been conceived.⁶⁹

To sum up. The present paper sought to render plausible the winter of 108/9 for the decease of Domitius Tullus (8.18). It went on to suggest that several letters in Book IX may fall in 109. Finally, Pliny had the news of his appointment to Bithynia (9.28.4) in the autumn of that year, and he went out in the summer of 110.

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⁶⁹ The year 110 earns the preference of W. Eck, *Chiron* 12 (1982), 349 f. Calpurnius Macer (suff. 103), the legate of Moesia Inferior, occurs early in the second calendar year (10.42). He is attested for 112 (*CIL* 3.779), but the beginning of his mandate cannot be established. It may emerge: Fabius Justus (suff. 102) is now certified for 106 (*AE* 1981, 746), continuing, it is presumed, until 108.