

XVII. The Coalescence of the Two Plinys

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In a book dedicated to the Emperor Septimius Severus about 210 A.D., Sammonicus Serenus stated that the *acupenser* (sturgeon), a rare fish that had been served at banquets of the Emperor, had been rare even in the time of Trajan. To prove this he cited a statement from the *Natural History* of the elder Pliny, and then added a bit of misinformation: "Plinius, ut scitis, ad usque Traiani Imperatoris venit aetatem" (Macrob. *Sat.* 3.16.5-7). It is evident that Sammonicus was confusing the two Plinys, or, to put this in another way, he knew of only one Pliny. Apparently no historian of Roman literature has realized the full significance of this error of Sammonicus.

First, a word about Sammonicus. Macrobius speaks of him (*Sat.* 3.16.6) as "vir suo saeculo doctus." Almost a hundred years after he was assassinated on the order of Caracalla, Spartianus gives an account of his death and adds: "cuius libri plurimi ad doctrinam extant" (S.H.A. *Caracal.* 4.4). In the *Vita* of Gordianus II we are told that while yet a private citizen he inherited through the son of Sammonicus, his tutor, the library of the elder Sammonicus, "qui (libri) censebantur ad sexaginta et duo milia" (S.H.A. *Gord.* 18.2). It is clear that Sammonicus was an outstanding scholar in the Roman world about 200 A.D.

Since he knew of only one Pliny, it is evident that when he was getting his education about 175 A.D., only sixty years after the death of the younger Pliny, and during the rest of his life up to the time of his death in 212, he did not become acquainted with Pliny's *Letters* and did not even learn that there had ever been a Plinius Junior. In the precious fifth letter of Book III, Pliny gives a list of the works of his uncle and describes his indefatigable industry. Sammonicus could not have read this letter without learning that there were two Plinys. In the 16th and 20th letters of Book VI Pliny describes the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. and the death of his uncle in this disaster. Sammonicus could not have extended the life of the author of the *Natural History* to the time of Trajan if he had read

these two letters. Moreover *ut scitis*, cited above, shows that Sammonicus was not giving merely his personal opinion in this, but expressing the *opinio communis* of his time. Pliny's *Epistulae* evidently were not in circulation in the years 175–212. The very existence of their author had passed from the knowledge of even scholarly men only 60 years after his death. The *Naturalis Historia* and the *Panegyric* which had been spoken to Trajan, each of them by C. Plinius Secundus, were in current circulation. By the method of logical criticism, which is responsible for so much unreliable inference and fancy in literary and textual criticism, it was inferred that the author of the *Natural History* lived long enough to have delivered the *Panegyric*.

Some will doubtless feel that it is simply impossible that the younger Pliny can have lost his identity and become completely merged in the figure of his more ponderous uncle only two generations after his death. They do not realize how many persons who were prominent in politics or literature 60 years ago have passed completely out of the knowledge of the general informed public of our day. This disappearance from the minds of men was made easier in the case of the younger Pliny by the fact that the works of uncle and nephew were published under exactly the same name, C. Plinius Secundus. It is also true that the younger Pliny never did anything in his lifetime that would cause his name to be mentioned by an ancient writer of history. His name actually does not occur in any ancient historical writing that has come down to us. He commanded no army or fleet, he fought in no battle to push back the barbarians who were pressing upon the borders of the empire, he took no part in any uprising against a reigning emperor nor helped to suppress any such rebellion. He never did anything that would make news in the larger political or military movements of his time, such as Tacitus and other ancient historians report. And he left no children, as his overshadowing uncle had left none, to keep the name and the tradition of the Pliny family alive after they were gone. When his orations were attributed to the author of the *Natural History*, the only thing he ever wrote that could differentiate him from his uncle was his *Epistulae*. One purpose of this paper is to make Classical scholars conscious of the fact that for nearly three centuries his *Epistulae* were not in general circulation, a fact that has important bearing upon the history of the manuscripts from which the modern text is derived. Throughout this period a few

copies were quietly resting undisturbed in libraries somewhere, biding their time until some sympathetic scholar should come upon one of them and bring it once more to the attention of people who read.

This situation with regard both to Pliny himself and to his *Letters* continued at least to the end of the fourth century. Macrobius probably composed his *Saturnalia* between 384, the dramatic date of this symposium, and 390, when he began the political career which sixteen years later led to his assassination. When he cited this statement of Sammonicus that the author of the *Natural History* lived on into the time of Trajan, he did not correct it. He was himself an antiquarian, and would certainly have corrected Sammonicus if he had known that he was in error. This means that Macrobius, when he received his education and through his years as scholar and author, did not acquire any knowledge of the *Letters* of Pliny or of their author. There was to him only one Pliny, who wrote both the *Natural History* and the *Panegyric to Trajan*, not only a scholar but also an eminent orator (Macrob. *Sat.* 1.5.7). In the latter half of the fourth century therefore the *Letters* of Pliny were still reposing undisturbed in the recesses of one or more libraries.

The same situation in regard to Pliny is found in Symmachus, who was prominent in the literary and the political life of the last half of the fourth century. The letters of Symmachus were collected, in large part from their recipients, and published by his son after the death of the father in 402. No one has ever successfully pointed out any reminiscence of Pliny in style, phrasing, or content in the *Letters* of Symmachus.¹ As published, all the letters that were addressed to one correspondent are gathered together into a group, and neither the groups nor the letters within the individual groups are arranged chronologically. No influence of Pliny is found in this mechanical arrangement of the letters of Symmachus by his son. Otto Seeck, the distinguished editor of the works of Symmachus for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, found no cause to mention Pliny as an influence leading either to the writing of these letters by Symmachus or their publication by his son. In recent times the

¹ This point is neatly summarized in Merrill, *C. Plini Caecili Epistularum Libri Decem* (Leipzig 1922) Praef. iv. Because he found no positive evidence of the use of the *Epistulae* in the third and fourth centuries, Merrill also inferred that they were not in general circulation at that time. This inference from mere lack of evidence is not convincing and his view, though correct, has not been accepted by scholars. See note 2 for one illustration.

suggestion has been made that the fact that the letters of Symmachus are in ten books resulted from the precedent of ten books in the *Letters* of Pliny.² Argument from analogy is nearly always unsafe: it leads to error more often than to the truth. The argument here will not, I think, bear inspection.

For this argument to be valid, the *Letters* of Pliny must have been held in high esteem at the time of the publication of the *Letters* of Symmachus. I think I have shown that their very existence was unknown at that time even to scholars, that they had been forgotten for at least two hundred years. There are about 800 of the letters of Symmachus, twice as many as there are of Pliny: ten books were needed to contain them in books of ordinary size. Seeck saw that there were ten books of the *Letters* of Symmachus without counting the *Relationes*,³ which now form the bulk of Book X. But he also saw that sixteen letters of Book IX, as we have it now, originally formed part of Book X. In his edition he numbers these as 125–42 of Book IX and also as 3–18 of Book X. The present Book X is made up of the first and second letters of the original Book X plus the *Relationes*. This situation implies a second edition of the *Letters* of Symmachus, in which the editor made room for the addition of the *Relationes* in his new Book X by transferring sixteen letters to Book IX. The transfer was made easy by the fact that the names of the addressees of these sixteen letters are unknown and Book IX is made up of letters in which the names of the addressees are not known. There is certainly serious question as to whether the *Relationes* were given in the original edition of the *Letters* of Symmachus by his son. The *Relationes* are not in any proper sense letters. They had been published by Symmachus himself, who did not publish any of his letters. He evidently regarded them as documents, not letters. The late editor who added them to the *Letters* in his practically new Book X may have worked after the ten-book corpus of Pliny's *Letters* had been published near the end of the fifth century. The tenth book of this corpus contains the reports of Pliny the Governor to Trajan the Emperor, material roughly similar to *Relationes*. This may indeed have suggested the addition of the *Relationes* to

² McGeachy, *Quintus Aurelius Symmachus and the Senatorial Aristocracy of the West* (Chicago 1942) 23, repeats as fact the current *post hoc ergo propter hoc* assumption that "The letters of Pliny furnished the model for arrangement of the letters of Symmachus." He offers no evidence in support of the statement, as in fact no other scholar has done.

³ On these *Relationes*, see Seeck, *Q. Aurelii Symmachi quae supersunt* (Berlin 1883 = MGH AA VI.1) pp. xvi–xx and 279–317.

the corpus of the *Letters* of Symmachus in a new edition, published a hundred years after the first edition by his son.

Sidonius Apollinaris (ca. 430–ca. 484) concentrated his literary efforts on the writing of poetry until 468, when he was about 40 years old; from 468 to the time of his death about fifteen years later, he wrote only *epistulae* for publication. In these he calls Pliny his teacher, and gives much evidence of imitation of Pliny.⁴ He became the first scholar in 300 years to speak of “the two Plinys” (*Ep.* 4.3.1), and assigns the *Panegyric* and other orations of C. Plinius Secundus to the author of the *Epistulae* (*Ep.* 8.10.3). He had evidently come into possession of a nine-book manuscript of the *Epistulae*, and at once conceived great admiration for them. He never learned of the existence of the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan, which in his time did not have a place in the corpus of Pliny’s *Letters*.⁵ He nowhere speaks of the discovery of his manuscript, but since Pliny’s *Letters* were unknown to Macrobius and Symmachus at the beginning of the fifth century and Sidonius was already a well-known poet when he first became acquainted with them, the rediscovery of the *Letters* and their author probably belongs somewhere near the middle of the fifth century, perhaps a little later than 450. Although Sidonius clearly distinguished the two Plinys, he does not designate the writer of the *Epistulae* as Plinius Iunior or Plinius Minor. These designations came into use much later; I do not recall seeing either of them earlier than the fifteenth century.

An interesting reminiscence of the disappearance of the younger Pliny from history in the third and fourth centuries is seen in the title which is found in one of the three families of Pliny manuscripts. Its parent manuscript was evidently prepared in northern Italy during this period of Pliny’s eclipse. It was from northern Italy that the Pliny family first came to the attention of the nation as a whole, and native sons are long remembered in their home state. The younger Pliny had endeared himself to his native town Comum by his constant affection for it and his many benefactions to it. Several inscriptions set up to him in this region have survived to modern times. In these his full legal name, C. Plinius Caecilius Secundus, is used. The Caecilii were locally well known and re-

⁴ Stout, *Scribe and Critic at Work in Pliny's Letters*, “Indiana Univ. Publ.,” Humanities Ser. No. 30 (Bloomington 1954) 2–4.

⁵ *Ibid.* 53–56.

spected about Comum. The younger Pliny did not lose his identity in his home town and in northern Italy. The north Italian editor of the mother manuscript of the nine-book family of Pliny manuscripts, in order to combat the current idea that there was only one Pliny, entitled his manuscript "C. Plinii *Caecilii* Secundi Epistulae." Pliny himself and the other two families of manuscripts did not use *Caecilii* in the title. From the age of seventeen on, Pliny had no need to use the cognomen *Caecilius* to distinguish himself from his adoptive father. At this time his uncle, his father by adoption, died and left him his heir. From this time on the public knew the younger Pliny only as C. Plinius Secundus, just as in Republican times the Scipio who destroyed Carthage, a Scipio by adoption only, was known to the public and to history simply as C. Cornelius Scipio, without the addition of the cognomen *Aemilianus*. This nine-book family of manuscripts evidently gained no wide circulation until some centuries later, which is one reason that it is now the best representative of the text of the *Letters*.

The rediscovery of the younger Pliny by Sidonius in about 468 did not prevent the misconception that the elder Pliny was the author of the younger man's works from cropping up here and there among scholars in later centuries. Vincent of Beauvais, for example, who died in 1264, quotes several excerpts from the first five books of Pliny's *Epistulae*, but assigns them to the author of the *Natural History*. Vincent was using Manuscript B, which is now in the Laurentian Library, or a close relative of this manuscript. It contains only the first 100 of Pliny's letters, and in the manuscript itself these follow immediately after the *Natural History* of the elder Pliny, with no indication that they are by a different Pliny. It is certain that when this manuscript was written in the tenth century, the scribe was under the impression that the two works were by the same author.

About the year 1320 a certain Iohannes Mansionarius read the *Letters* of Pliny in the library of Saint Mark's in Verona. From this manuscript (δ) he prepared his *Brevis Annotatio de Duobus Pliniis*,⁶ a two page document in which he carefully distinguished the two Plinys. This *Brevis Annotatio* is found prefixed to several fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Letters*, and the active study of these *Letters* in Italy in that century laid this mystery to rest for all time.

⁶ On the *Brevis Annotatio* see Merrill, "On the Eight-Book Tradition of Pliny's Letters in Verona," *CP* 5 (1910) 186 ff.