PLINY ON THE NILE: *PANEGYRICUS* 29-32

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Abstract: in *Panegyricus* 29-32 Pliny deals with the Nile flood as part of his praise for Trajan's handling of the *annona* (Rome's grain supply). The relatively weak Nile inundation of 99 A.D., and Trajan's consequent import of grain to Egypt to mitigate crop failures there, are treated as if they were catastrophic events and a long-awaited opportunity for reversing the balance of power between Egypt the supplier and Rome the receiver of life-giving grain. Why? Pliny's remarkable expression of hostility towards Egypt, which stands at the far extreme of his spectrum of attitudes to the Hellenic east, is a reaffirmation of the Augustan character of Trajan's rule. Pliny seeks to counter the Egyptian sympathies of the Flavian dynasty, particularly those of Domitian, by emulating the Actian decade and its rhetoric of Roman victory over the east.

Keywords: Pliny, *Panegyricus*, Egypt, Nile, Domitian

1. *Introduction*

The opening chapters of the *Panegyricus* trace, in broad terms, Trajan's adoption by Nerva in 97 A.D., his accession on the death of Nerva in 98 and eventual entry into Rome in 99[1]. Pliny then focuses on the emperor's *munera* to the people of Rome (*paneg.* 25-55). Such "gifts" in the form of donations, spectacles and legislative and fiscal reform were an expected part of a new emperor's installation. (Rome had already received similar imperial largesse just three years before upon the accession of Nerva in 96 C.E.) Later chapters in the *munera* section look at Trajan's reforms in *aerarium* and *fiscus*, and changes in hereditary tax, slave ownership, wills, and legacies, before moving onto the arts and public works. But at the outset of his survey of *munera*, Pliny reviews Trajan's *donatiuum* to the military and his more generous *congiarium*

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to the people of Rome (*paneg.* 25)[2]. Immediately after, he praises the alimentary scheme initiated by Trajan for the benefit of 5000 freeborn children in the city (*paneg.* 25-8)[3]. The scheme enrolled children as recipients of the corn dole. Pliny next moves seamlessly on to the source of the children's corn dole: the *annona*, Rome's corn supply (*paneg.* 29). The *annona*, according to Pliny, is the equivalent of a perpetual *congiarium* (*paneg.* 29.1).

The introduction of the topic of the *annona* prepares the way for an arresting passage on Egypt and its role in the supply of grain to Rome (*paneg.* 30-2) [4]. Pliny prefaces the subject with suitably resonant alliteration: *Aegyptus alendis augendisque* (*paneg.* 30.1). It is a foretaste of the notably heightened style that commentators have rightly noted that Pliny maintains in these paragraphs[5], not to mention manifestations of the spatial and political sublime[6]. This section will be the principle focus of the present paper. The annual flooding of the Nile was the source of Egypt's abundant fertility in corn. But, rather than focusing on this yearly miracle, so widely celebrated elsewhere by writers and artists [7], Pliny chooses to focus on a recent *failure* of the Nile flood. Pliny praises Trajan for his response to the "disaster", and lectures Egypt with studied severity on the consequences of the failure of the flood and its remedy by the emperor. The tone of the lecture prompted G.E. Gierig, the great 18th century commentator on Pliny, to remark: «Plinius oblitus suae dignitatis, iam delabitur eo ut iusto iniquius et paene

[2] The names of the recipients of the *congiarium* were entered on a list (*paneg.* 25.4). The list may have been that of the *plebs frumentaria*, i.e. the recipients of the corn-dole: perhaps as few as 150,000 citizens amongst a total of 1.25 million; see Bennett (2001), pp. 59-60.

[3] The total number of freeborn children in Rome aged between 0 and 16 may have been well over half a million. On one estimate, only 312 new additions could be made to the lists each year, after the initial enrollment of the lucky 5000; see Bennett (2001), pp. 81-4. Pliny's own alimentary scheme in Comum, initiated shortly before, likewise benifited perhaps as few as 175 children a year, out of around 7,000 free children in total; see Duncan-Jones (1982), p. 27, Hoffer (1999), pp. 95-6, Roncaglia (2018), pp. 79-80. On alimentary schemes in Italy more generally, see Woolf (1990), Kehoe (1997), pp. 78-87, Purcell (2000), pp. 430-1.

[4] The connection between accession gift (*congiarium*), grain allowances and subsidies (*alimenta*, *annona*) and crops of Egypt «is not arbitrary: three out of four Trajanic prefects of the *annona* are later appointed as prefects of Egypt» (Manolaraki (2013), p. 235).

[5] See Durry (1938), pp. 131-4, noting the allusions to (e.g.) the *Georgics* at *paneg.* 30.3 *ipse fecunditatis parens* (Verg. *georg.* II.173 *salue magna parens frugum*) and 30.4 *collium … supino … ac detinenti solo* (Verg. *georg.* II.276 *accliue solum collesque supinos*).

[6] See Hutchinson (2011), pp. 138-41.

[7] For widely distributed Nilotic scenes attested across the Roman world, including those of the annual flood, see (e.g.) Versluys (2002), pp. 43-202, Merrills (2017), pp. 106-49; for literary celebrations, see below.

ridicule Aegyptiis insultet»[8]. This remarkable taunting of Egypt demands investigation and contextualisation. An attempt will be made, towards the end of the paper, to set the passage within the broader context of Pliny's general attitudes to the Hellenic eastern half of empire.

2. *The flooding and failure of the Nile in 99 A.D.*

Farmers on the Nile were required to deliver a proportion of their produce to the authorities as payment of tax to the Roman government. At the end of the first century A.D., Egypt provided enough corn to feed Rome for around four months[9]. Seneca records the excitement stirred up at Puteoli and around the bay of Naples by the first sighting of the annual grain convoys from Alexandria (*epist.* 77). These ships must have been a familiar sight to Pliny too. It was the responsibility of the Elder Pliny, as commander of the Misene fleet in the late 70s A.D. (Plin. *ep.* VI.16), to police the waters through which the Alexandrian convoys sailed to reach Puteoli. From there the grain was transported in smaller boats to Ostia: these would have been visible to Pliny as they sailed past his Laurentine villa a few kilometres south of the port of Ostia (*ep.* II.17.2, 26).

Pliny's inclusion of Egypt and the corn supply in the *Panegyricus* is not a simple matter of sight-seeing, however. It is also a demonstration of technical expertise and statecraft: Pliny knows how the central state operates, understands what keeps Rome functioning[10]. Part of that knowledge was an appreciation of how the Nile flood worked. No Roman senator or senior equestrian could visit Egypt without express permission from the emperor[11]. But for a clear explanation of the phenomenon, Pliny need have looked no further than the fourth book of Seneca's *Natural Questions* or the fifth book of his uncle's *Natural History* (*hn* V.57-8) [12]:

incipit crescere luna noua, quaecumque post solstitium est, sensim modiceque cancrum sole transeunte, abundantissime autem leonem, et residit in uirgine isdem quibus adcreuit modis. … auctus per puteos mensurae notis deprehenduntur. iustum incrementum est cubitorum XVI. minores aquae non omnia rigant, ampliores detinent tardius recedendo. hae serendi tempora absumunt solo madente, illae non dant sitiente. utrumque reputat prouincia. in XII cubitis famem sentit, in XIII etiamnum esurit, XIIII cubita hilaritatem adferunt, XV securitatem, XVI delicias.

[8] Gierig (1796) on *paneg.* 31.3.

[9] See Rickman (1980), p. 118, drawing on Joseph. *bell. Iud.* II.383-5.

[10] See Norena (2011), p. 32.

[11] Cf. Tac. *ann.* II.59.

[12] Cf. *hn* XVIII.167, Sen. *nq* IVA.2.8-12.

The flood irrigated the land in the weeks leading up to early August, before the planting of seed. «[Artificially constructed basin] areas on either side of the river», in the summary of one modern authority, «were flooded to a certain depth for forty days and then after the swollen Nile had subsided the water was drained back into the river»[13]. This controlled draining took place in October. It left the ground beside the river soaked, covered with a rich deposit of silt, and naturally reinvigorated: wheat could be planted every year. The whole system was vulnerable, however: if the flood was too weak, then areas for cultivation on either side of the Nile could not be properly inundated. As the Elder Pliny indicates, a rise of only twelve cubits or less brought the risk of famine; a rise of 14 cubits or more ensured the success of the crop for the year. Conversely, if the flood was too strong, then the areas would be drowned beyond the control of the tenant farmers.

In 99 A.D., the year before Pliny offered his *gratiarum actio* in the senate, the Nile flood seems to have experienced a failure[14]. This can be inferred from a papyrus that documents the request of a refund by a farmer (*p.Oxy* 2958):

«To Dius, strategus, from Apollonius also called Secundus, son of Epimachus, from the city of the Oxyrhynchi. I request authority for the payment of the 192 drachmas owed to me on account of the price of requisitioned wheat at 16 drachmas (per artaba) from the produce of the past second year of Imperator Caesar Nerva Traianus Augustus Germanicus, of which I paid in accordance with the orders of Pompeius Planta the most excellent prefect 12 artabas through the sitologoi of Chysis and Athychis; and I swear by Imperator Caesar Nerva Traianus Augustus Germanicus that I owe nothing on account of … or requisitioned (wheat) up to the present day, else I may be liable to the consequences of the oath. The third year of Imperator Caesar Nerva Traianus Augustus Germanicus.»

Apollonius writes in the third year of Trajan's reign (100 A.D.) with reference to a levy made on the harvest of the emperor's second year (99 A.D.). The modern Oxyrhynchus commentator notes that the price of requisitioned wheat, at 16 drachmas per artaba, can be regarded as «remarkably high»; while the requested rate of refund is also rather steep. Together, these

[13] Rickman (1980), p. 114-15.

[14] In 98 or 99 A.D., Pliny also wrote to inform Trajan, among other things, of a series of crop failures on his Tifernum estates (*ep.* X.8.5). Needless to say, the opportunity to taunt the tenant farmers of central Italy was not taken on this occasion.

fragments of evidence point towards poor agricultural conditions along the Nile in 99 A.D., i.e. the flood was lower than required or anticipated[15].

In the *Panegyricus*, Pliny devotes considerable attention to describing the nature of the recent failure of the Nile flood. The river became slow and would scarcely leave its bed: *piger Nilus cunctanter alueo sese ac languide extulerat* (*paneg.* 30.2). The resulting inundation of the surrounding fields was consequently rather confined: *cum ipse fecunditatis parens contractior et exilior isdem ubertatem eius anni angustiis quibus abundantiam suam cohibuisset* (*paneg.* 30.3). This close interest in water and water-supply, in fact, is thoroughly characteristic of Pliny. Water is a constant theme of the *Epistulae*: flowing, ebbing, running and navigable. His fascination with the subject easily exceeds most contemporaries. This interest is clear enough in lengthy letters on the miraculous spring by lake Como (IV.30), the source of the river Clitumnus (VIII.8), the overflowing of the Tiber (VIII.17), and the floating islands of lake Vadimon (VIII.20). Pliny also sails on lake Como (VI.24.2). And his gaze is firmly fixed on lake or sea next to villas owned by himself or others on lake Como (I.3.1, IX.7), the Laurentine coast (I.9.6, II.17) and Centumcellae north of Rome (VI.31.15-17). Even the inland "Tuscan" villa, close to the upper reaches of the Tiber (V.6.12), highlights running streams and fountains in its most intimate venues (V.6.36-40). Report is made to Trajan on the details of Pliny's journey by boat to Pontus-Bithynia (X.15, 17a). Once arrived Pliny devotes considerable effort to the project of a canal from lake to sea at Nicomedia (X.41-2, 61-2) and to the water supplies of Sinope and Amastris (X.90, 98). Such interest befits a man who became, not long after his consulship, *curator aluei Tiberis et riparum et cloacarum urbis* (104-6 A.D.). He also maintained a lifelong friendship with Iulius Frontinus, Rome's foremost authority on aqueducts and water supply[16].

Pliny's fascination with water extends to a piece of precision in the *Panegyricus* description of the Nile flood that is rarely noticed or appreciated (*paneg.* 30.4):

neque enim solum uagus ille cum expandatur amnis intra usurpata semper collium substiterat atque haeserat, sed supino etiam ac detinenti solo non placido se mollique lapsu refugum abstulerat necdum satis humentes terras addiderat arentibus.

[15] See *p.Oxy.* 2958 vol. 41 (1972), pp. 39-40, where it is noted, as further evidence of a failed or disappointing flood, that no "Nilus" coins were produced in 99 A.D. and that land on the sea-shore was cultivated that year.

[16] For the details of Pliny's career and friendships, and further evidence of his interest in water, see Gibson (2020), especially chapter 3. For the prominent role of water in the *Panegyricus*, see Manolaraki (2008).

By the standards of ancient descriptions of the flooding of the Nile, Pliny is remarkably exact in his choice of terms and observation[17]. The Nile left its bed, but did not reach its normal levels of inundation amongst the higher ground bordering the river; even on level ground it receded quickly, leaving scarcely enough moisture or residue to allow the growing of crops. In other words, this was not a "failure" of the Nile flood, as such, but a relatively weak inundation, perhaps one of 8-10 cubits[18]. The crop was poor, but did not fail completely – as *p.Oxy* 2958 also suggests.

3. *The failure of the flood: Pliny on the consequences for Egypt*

Such precision can hardly have been the product of eye witness experience. Rather, Pliny is seeking, through his words, to empower the senate with vision of a province formally out of bounds to them[19]. More importantly, Pliny's restrained description of the Nile flood is a prelude to a set of consequences envisaged for Egypt that appears entirely disproportionate to the otherwise so conscientiously evoked "weak inundation" of 99 A.D. Despite the meticulousness of his own description, and despite the fact that the Nile flood had been very poor in 95 A.D. and merely mediocre in 99 (and would be mediocre again in 102 and 104)[20], Pliny writes as if the event of 99 were the catastrophe of a lifetime. Egypt's claim to the vital supply of her conquerors is thrown back in her face (*paneg.* 31.2):

percrebuerat antiquitus urbem nostram nisi opibus Aegypti ali sustentarique non posse. superbiebat uentosa et insolens natio, quod uictorem quidem populum pasceret tamen quodque in suo flumine in suis nauibus uel abundantia nostra uel fames esset.

These now empty boasts reveal Egypt to be a «vain and presumptuous nation». Trajan, in turn, responded promptly to the crisis, and quickly supplied Egypt with the grain needed to feed her hungry inhabitants. Pliny draws a lesson for the province from this act of imperial generosity (*paneg.* 31.3):

[17] As is noted by Bonneau (1971), p. 172.

[18] See Bonneau (1971), p. 240. for a chart that assesses the relative strengths of historically attested Nile floods.

[19] See Manolaraki (2013) p. 243. At the same time, through "taming" the Nile, Pliny removes the idea of the river as source of leverage against the emperor: Romans must not overestimate Egypt; see Manolaraki (2013), pp. 243-5.

[20] See Bonneau (1971), pp. 238-40.

discat igitur Aegyptus credatque experimento, non alimenta se nobis sed tributa praestare; sciat se non esse populo Romano necessariam, et tamen seruiat.

So far from considering herself indispensable to Rome on account of her grain supply, Egypt must henceforth pay appropriate tribute and acknowledge that she is Rome's slave. The pointed denial of *alimenta* as a term to describe Egypt's supply of grain to Rome looks back to the emperor's alimentary schemes praised by Pliny in an immediately preceding passage (*paneg.* 28.4-7)[21], Egypt cannot consider herself the equal of Trajan here. And the province should not necessarily expect further imperial generosity (*paneg.* 32.3-4):

precor ut hac principis benignitate contentum molli gremio semina recondat, multiplicata restituat. non quidem reposcimus fenus: putet tamen esse soluendum, fallacemque unius anni fidem omnibus annis omnibusque postea saeculis tanto magis quia non exigimus excuset.

No interest on Trajan's "loan" of grain is asked from Egypt[22]. It is instead her duty to redeem «the broken promise of a single year in all the years and all the centuries to come». Pliny implies that the catastrophe of a single year has been so great, and the largesse of Trajan's response so unparalleled, that Egypt can only repay its debt by many decades of resumed and uninterrupted normal service.

4. *Egypt, Augustus, and Trajan*

Why does Pliny seize on a hardly unparalleled mediocre inundation of the Nile as if it were a long-awaited turning point for future relations between Egypt and Rome? (The reversal in status that he envisages between the two is not very far short of the *Sibylline Oracles* and *their* prophecies of a realignment between Rome and the orient in the opposite direction.) One answer is that the elevation of the problem to a crisis allows Pliny the chance to reconnect the

[21] Cf. Lavan (2013), pp. 169-70.

[22] Note that Pliny does not talk of the wheat as a "gift" to Egypt (despite the broader context of Trajan's *munera*): it was a loan – with all the attendant need to pay it back, at a time of a failure of the harvest, with the resources to pay already reduced; see Bonneau (1971), pp. 173-4. There was, at least, no interest to pay on the loan. Yet Trajan's treatment of Egypt was (even) less generous after the mediocre flood of 102. Many inhabitants left their villages; but the taxes due from the absentees were not remitted, and rather added to the burden of those who remained; see Bonneau (1971), p. 174.

principate of Trajan with its Augustan roots. The subject of relations between Egypt and Rome, including those between Augustus and Alexandria, is a vast one, with a colossal bibliography to match: only the briefest of outlines can be offered here. Representations of Egypt in Greco-Roman literature had long oscillated between "utopian" and "hostile" versions. «On the one hand, [Egypt was] a venerable bastion of traditional values, piety, and social stability», in the useful summary of a recent critic; «on the other hand, the embodiment of all the most hostile classical stereotypes about the peoples of the Near East» [23]. Within the former tradition, Egypt acted as a kind refuge for ancestral ideals, whence they might be recovered in the event of disaster or conflict striking the Greco-Roman world[24]. A consistently hostile tradition emerged only in the late Republic, when Rome first had extensive dealings with the contemporary Ptolemaic dynasty[25]. Under Augustus, such enmity found a new focus in Cleopatra – so notoriously derided by the Augustan poets[26]. The language of Egyptian humiliation and Roman superiority came easily to their lips, as it would also to Pliny: *uincit Roma fide Phoebi: dat femina poenas:* | *sceptra per Ionias fracta uehuntur aquas* (Prop. IV.6.57-8).

Both traditions could be entertained more or less simultaneously. In the *de re publica*, Cicero might praise the preservation of ancient memory in Egypt (*rep.* III.14), while denouncing the Greeks of Alexandria in a speech in defence of Rabirius Postumus (*Rab. Post.* 35-6). In the *Georgics*, Vergil attributes preservation of knowledge of the ancient rite of "bougonia" to the *Pellaei gens fortunata Canopi* (IV.287); sketches in their miraculous life beside the Nile in flood (IV.288-9 *accolit effuso stagnantem flumine Nilum* | *et circum pictis uehitur sua rura phaselis*), praising the fertility brought by the river (IV.293 *et uiridem Aegyptum nigra fecundat harena*); and hails the salvation for apiculture that the region has found in the rite (IV.294). In the *Aeneid*, by contrast, the presence at Actium of the *Aegyptia coniunx* is denounced as *nefas* (*Aen.* VIII.688), and the gods who accompany her are monstrous (*Aen.* VIII.698 *omnigenumque deum monstra et latrator Anubis*) in their array against Neptune, Venus and Minerva. The *Georgics*, nevertheless, do not lack hostility towards contemporary Egypt. In the proem to the third *Georgic* (III.1-38), Vergil speaks of founding games in Italy that will eclipse their Greek rivals. This passage, as is now well known, makes extensive reference to

[23] Tracy (2014), p. 8.

[24] See the useful overview of Tracy (2014), pp. 1-6.

[25] See the overview of Tracy (2014), pp. 6-8.

[26] Cf., most notoriously, Hor. *epod.* 9, *carm.* I.37; Verg. *Aen.* VIII.688. 696-700; Prop. II.16.35-42, III.11, IV.6; see further Wyke (2002), pp. 195-243.

the proem to Book 3 of the *Aetia* of Callimachus: the *Victory of Berenice*, in which the triumph of the queen of Alexandria at the chariot race in Nemea is celebrated. Vergil's scene includes a temple with Caesar at its centre: sculpted on its doors are representations of Roman victory over the peoples of the east, including *undantem bello magnumque fluentem | Nilum* (*georg.* III.28-9). An initial homage to the great poet of Alexandria and the queen he honoured is ultimately overwritten with a celebration of victory over the land of Cleopatra[27]. «In Roman culture», comments Alessandro Barchiesi, «the idea of appropriating enemy culture and turning it into an instrument of domination has a long history»[28].

The key point here, so far as the *Panegyricus* is concerned, is that hostility to Egypt is a crucial part of the ideology of the foundation of the principate at Rome. Plato might have dreamed of a refoundation of Athens along the lines preserved in his Egyptian utopia, but Augustus based his dynasty on an ostensible rejection of the land of the Nile[29]. The repudiation of Egypt was more apparent than real, since Augustus learned and appropriated enough from the Ptolemies to render Rome a version of Alexandria on the Tiber[30]. The belligerent attitudes of the Actian decade were not easily forgotten, however. In an important sense, then, Pliny's expression of hostility towards Egypt is a reaffirmation of the Augustan character of Trajan's rule. This particular affirmation is part of a broader programme in the *Panegyricus*, whereby Pliny – as Adalberto Magnavacca has shown – deliberately create a series of links between Trajan and the Augustus of the *Res Gestae diui Augusti*[31]. The return of Augustus is also, as we shall later, a work of deliberate restoration, after the Egyptian "aberrations" of Vespasian and, particularly, his son Domitian.

5. *Utopians on the Nile: Seneca, Lucan, the Elder Pliny*

[27] See Barchiesi (2011), pp. 531-3, correcting the omissions of Thomas (1983).

[28] Barchiesi (2011), p. 533.

[29] The third and final day of his "triple triumph" in 29 B.C. had been devoted to the defeat of Cleopatra. Coins struck not long after bore the legend *Aegypt*[*o*] *Capta* beneath a depiction of a crocodile. The portico of the Danaids in the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, dedicated in 25 B.C., portrayed the slaughter of the sons of Aegyptus. (On this particularly risky commemoration, see Galinsky (1996), pp. 220-2.) The inscription on the obelisk that formed the centrepiece of Augustus' monumental sundial on the Campus Martius, erected in 10 B.C., reiterated the message of the incorporation of Egypt within the power of the Roman people. For a succinct overview of the changing role of Cleopatra and Egypt in Augustan ideology, see Williams (2001), Wyke (2002), pp. 223-43.

[30] See (e.g.) Swetnam-Burland (2015), pp. 65-104.

[31] See Magnavacca's paper in this volume.

Pliny's emphasis on the failure of the Nile, and revival of the anti-Egyptian rhetoric of an earlier age, stand out all the more sharply when set in the context of a series of texts of more recent vintage. Seneca, Lucan and the Elder Pliny all offer accounts of the Nile that are utopian in different ways. Each of them gives prominence to the bounty of Egypt's great river or to the role of providence in creating the Nile[32]. In Book XVIII of the *Natural History*, the Elder Pliny sets himself the task of describing the «easy conditions prevailing in Egypt» (*Aegypti facilitate*), where «the Nile plays the part of farmer» (*Nilus … coloni uice fungens*, XVIII.167). Historic instances of failures of the flood, nevertheless, are acknowledged in Book 5 (*hn* V.58) in the course of a long and admiring disquisition on Egypt and the course and rising of the Nile (*hn* V.51-9).

Seneca had given more explicit and sustained emphasis to the providential aspects of the river, in a series of chapters in the *Natural Questions* devoted to the source of the Nile and the nature and causes of its flooding (*nq* IVA.2). He hails the Nile as the «most noble of rivers» (IVA.2.1 *hunc nobilissimum amnium*), before praising Nature's bounty for flooding Egypt at the height of summer with a life-giving flow. Seneca later discourses on the Nile's miraculous gift of fertility (IVA.2.10 *mira … natura fluminis*), and describes the flooding of the river as a «most beautiful sight» (IVA.2.11 *illa facies pulcherrima est cum iam se in agros Nilus ingessit*). His account of the inundation includes the observation that «not one of the farmers looks at the sky»: *nemo aratorum respicit caelum* (IVA.2.2). Pliny signals that he has read Seneca's beneficent account, with his own observation on the recent actions of Egyptian farmers: *frustra tunc Aegyptus nubila optauit caelumque respexit* (*paneg.* 30.3). Seneca acknowledges that the Nile can and does fail (*nq* IVA.2.2, 16), but dwells on the miraculous features of the river. By his reversal of Seneca's detail on farmers' observation of the sky, Pliny underlines that he will dwell rather on the failure of the river.

Lucan drew heavily on Seneca for the speech of the Egyptian priest Acoreus in the tenth book of his epic (X.194-331). Here the priest discourses to Caesar on the source of the Nile and the causes of its flood. Although Acoreus has little to say on the actual mechanics and effects of the Nile flood[33], two things stand out from his account. The first is the priest's absolute insistence on the role of a beneficent providence in the creation and operation of the river: Seneca's

[32] On broad Roman conceptions of the Nile across a range of textual and material media, up to the Flavian era, see Merrills (2017).

[33] See Tracy (2014), pp. 205-6.

emphasis on complementary rational and scientific explanation is deliberately eclipsed[34]. The second is the complete absence from Acoreus' account of the possibility that the Nile flood might fail. The annual overflowing of the river, rather, is a cosmic necessity: *sic iussit natura parens discurrere Nilum, | sic opus est mundo* (X.238-9). This is despite the fact that the dramatic date of his speech is in the autumn of the year in which Pompey died: an event tied by other observers to the portent of the lowest ever flood of the Nile recorded earlier that year[35].

By contrast, as suits a scenario of failure, all suggestion of beneficence or providence has been removed from the Younger Pliny's account - except in one particular regard. Fortune, he suggests, has deliberately used the Nile failure to test Trajan: *crediderim tamen per hunc Aegypti statum tuas fortunam uires experiri, tuamque uigilantiam spectare uoluisse* (*paneg.* 31.1). Egypt, for its part, prayed for the help of Trajan as if from a god (*paneg.* 30.5 *regio fraudata sic opem Caesaris inuocauit*)[36]. Trajan's beneficent supply of grain from Rome's stores provided an immediate solution: *beneficio tuo nec maligna tellus*, «by your gracious aid the earth has not begrudged her fruits» (*paneg.* 31.6). The aspect of the affair Pliny chooses to highlight as miraculous is that Rome's own food supply was not affected by Egypt's deficiency (*paneg.* 31.5 *mirum*). He prays, finally, to the soil and river of Egypt that they ask no more of the emperor in future (*paneg.* 32.3). Pliny, in sum, refuses distinctive elements of the largely utopian accounts of the Nile produced in the Neronian and Flavian eras.

Other "hostile" texts of the early imperial age likewise counteract these providential visions of Egypt, particularly when the gaze of the writer shifts from the river itself to the local inhabitants who reap benefits from its bounty. Notoriously, at the outset of the *Histories*, Tacitus speaks of a chaotic and unstable country, that is *aditu difficilem, annonae fecundam, superstitione ac lascivia discordem et mobilem, insciam legum, ignaram magistratuum* (*hist.* I.11.1)[37]. The Nile, it is acknowledged, contributes to the *annona*; but the inhabitants of Egypt are recipients of Tacitus' criticism rather than admiration. A rather more nuanced, if still disapproving, account of the relationship between the Nile and the people of Egypt can be found in a speech delivered in Alexandria by Dio of Prusa between 105 and 112 A.D. In *To the Alexandrians*, Dio warns

[34] See Tracy (2014), pp. 145-224. More broadly, Tracy (2014) argues that a utopian Egypt is associated with Pompey and the republic, whereas the luxurious, servile Egypt of contemporary hostile stereotype is associated with Caesar.

[35] Cf. Pliny *hn* V.58 (see below on this passage), and see Tracy (2014), pp. 168-9.

[36] Cf. Livy XXII.14.8 *sociorum saepius nostrum quam deorum inuocantium opem*, OLD s.v. *inuoco* 1b.

[37] On the context and content of the passage, see Damon (2003), pp. 123-4.

his audience of the dangers posed by their pride: he singles out «the Nile, the city's trademark, as the climactic example of the Alexandrians' misguided self-importance» (*Alex.* 32.38)[38]:

ἀναγωγαὶ δὲ καὶ κατάρσεις καὶ ρλήθους ὑρερβολὴ καὶ ὠνίων καὶ νεῶν ρανηγύρεως καὶ λιμένος καὶ ἀγορᾶς ἐστιν ἐγκώμιον, οὐ ρόλεως· οὐδέ γε, ἂν ὕδωρ ἐραινῇ τις, ἀνθρώρων ἔραινος οὗτός ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ φρεάτων· οὐδ᾽ ἂν ρερὶ εὐκρασίας λέγῃ τις, τοὺς ἀνθρώρους εἶναί φησιν ἀγαθούς, ἀλλὰ τὴν χώραν· οὐδ᾽ ἂν ρερὶ ἰχθύων, τὴν ρόλιν ἐραινεῖ· ρόθεν;; ἀλλὰ θάλατταν ἢ λίμνην ἢ ροταμόν. ὑμεῖς δέ, ἂν ἐγκωμιάζῃ τις τὸν Νεῖλον, ἐραίρεσθε, ὥσρερ αὐτοὶ ῥέοντες ἀρὸ Αἰθιορίας.

«Through his reduction of urban pride to absurdity», in the analysis of Eleni Manolaraki, «Dio presses his listener to detach from their physical environment and to adopt a more critical view of their collective behaviour»[39]. His ultimate aim is to persuade his addressees to aspire to a shared Mediterranean identity under Trajan and to sacrifice their strong sense of Alexandrian individuality[40]. *To the Alexandrians,* in fact, contains more reference to the Roman authorities than any other speech in the Prusan orator's extensive corpus. Dio speaks not as imperial envoy, however, but rather as one with a consistent message for all Hellenic inhabitants of the empire: harmony, fraternal concord, and peace. (Hellenic peace and concord, of course, are greatly desired for their role in reducing the need for Roman intervention in local affairs[41].)

The Nile plays a central role in bolstering the individualism from which Dio wishes the Alexandrians to turn away. Similarly in Pliny, the exceptionalism of the Nile has fuelled Egyptian pride; but the failure of the flood now gives Romans and their emperor the chance to re-assert themselves over the inhabitants of Egypt: *pudebat sterilitatis insolitae nec minus erubescebat fame quam torquebatur, cum pariter a te necessitatibus eius pudorique subuentum est* (*paneg.* 31.6). If the Younger Pliny is far removed from the utopian vision of Egypt offered by the Elder Pliny or Seneca, he is hardly very close, either, to the sort of statesmanlike criticism and balanced advice offered by Dio to the inhabitants of one of the leading cities of the Mediterranean. Pliny's intention is not to be helpful, but rather to offer public rebuke and

[38] Manolaraki (2013), p. 240.

[39] Manolaraki (2013), p. 240.

[40] Cf. Manolaraki (2013), p. 241.

[41] On Dio of Prusa, Pliny, their meeting in Bithynia (Pliny *ep.* X.81-2) and Dio's strategies for reducing Roman involvement in Hellenic affairs, see Gibson (2020), chapter 8, Billaut (2015).

even insult to contemporary Egypt, as Gierig so clearly saw[42]. In this respect, as suggested earlier, he has much in common with the Augustan poets.

6. *Pliny's rhetoric and the tradition of the Nile flood as portent*

The precise terms of the hostile criticism in *paneg.* 30-2 will repay further study, as a prelude to understanding Pliny's attitudes to Egyptians in the context of his broader perspectives on the inhabitants of the eastern half of empire.

The key to interpreting the vehemence of Pliny's rhetoric perhaps lies in grasping the evident existence of a tradition that seized on particularly low or notably high Nile floods as portents of political disaster or success in Rome's Mediterranean world. Historical knowledge of the Nile flood was a prestigious subject, to judge from Seneca's remark that Callimachus is his source for the fact that the Nile had not flooded for nine years in a row in earlier centuries (*nq* IVA.2.16)[43]. He adds that a failure of the Nile flood in both the tenth and eleventh years of Cleopatra's reign (i.e. 42-1 B.C.) had been widely interpreted as heralding the failure of the kingdom of two potentates, Antony and Cleopatra[44]. Dio Cassius records various portents of the success of Vespasian in attaining the principate in 69 A.D.: «Following Vespasian's entry into Alexandria the Nile overflowed, having in one day risen a palm higher than usual; such an occurrence, it was said, had only taken place only once before. Vespasian himself healed two persons, one having a withered hand, the other being blind …» (Dio LXVI.8.1). A deficient flood spelled disaster for Antony and Cleopatra, while an unusually large overflow, amongst other miracles, heralded ascent to the imperial throne by Vespasian.

The Elder Pliny supplies details of the portent offered by a particularly low flood, again in the era of Cleopatra: *maximum incrementum ad hoc aeui fuit cubitorum XVIII Claudio principe, minimum V Pharsalico bello, ueluti necem Magni prodigio quodam flumine aduersante* (*hn* V.58). A disastrously low flood of five cubits in 48 B.C. – allegedly the worst in historical memory – is taken to be a sign that the Nile was trying to oppose the murder of

[42] Responding to Gierig, Marcel Durry, the great commentator on the *Panegyricus*, wrote: «Cette remarque de 1796 a un accent tout moderne; elle ne tient pas assez compte du jugement politique du sénateur qui allait rappeler (ch. 32) la nécessité de maintenir l'unité de l'*Imperium*» (Durry (1938), p. 133). But for the reality of Pliny's vision of the "unity" of the empire in *paneg.* 32, see below.

[43] Seneca is presumably referring to the work *On the Rivers of the Inhabited World*; for the little that is known about this work, see Krevans (2011), pp. 128-9.

[44] Sen. *nq* IVA.2.16 *biennio continuo regnante Cleopatra non ascendisse, decimo regni anno et undecimo, constat. significatam aiunt duobus rerum potientibus defectionem; Antonii enim Cleopatraeque defecit imperium.*

Pompey after the battle of Pharsalus in August of that year (the month when normally the flood was at its height). It can be added here that in the *Panegyricus*, Pliny has perhaps taken notice of this link between Pompey and the Nile. Pompey is named only three times in the whole of Pliny's corpus[45]. He is mentioned for the first time in the paragraph immediately preceding the section on the Nile, where Pliny praises him for the *cura annonae* (*paneg.* 29.1-2):

huius aliquando cura Pompeio non minus addidit gloriae quam pulsus ambitus campo, exactus hostis mari, Oriens triumphis Occidensque lustratus. nec uero ille ciuilius quam parens noster auctoritate consilio fide reclusit uias portus patefecit … diuersasque gentes ita commercio miscuit, ut quod genitum esset usquam, id apud omnes natum uideretur.

Pliny refers here to the five-year command awarded in 57 BC to Pompey for dealing with the grain shortage in Rome: Pompey is figured as Trajan's predecessor for successful control of the corn supply. Where the Elder links the failure of the Nile in 48 B.C. with the death of Pompey, the Younger goes on to link a failure of the Nile in 99 A.D. to Trajan in his role as Pompey's successor as curator of the *annona*. In this Pompeian role, Trajan brings aid to a humiliated Egypt. This image of Pompey in life is evidently designed to overwrite any lingering associations between the Nile and Pompey's shameful death on the shores of Egypt[46]. In a context of victory, there must be no mention of Roman defeat.

The larger point at issue, however, remains that of a tradition which evidently focused on the flooding or failure of the Nile as a portent for major political realignments in the Mediterranean. This tradition is the context for Pliny's desire to interpret the mediocre inundation of 99 A.D. as if it were herald of another important shift in the imperial pendulum. The change in the balance of power that Pliny envisages is clearly set out[47]. In the past Egypt, that *uentosa et insolens natio*, felt a superiority over Rome with its boast (*superbiebat*) that it fed its conquerors: *uictorem … populum pasceret* (*paneg.* 31.2). The *superbia* of Egypt contains an unmistakable reference to Vergil's conception of Rome's imperial mission to «war

[45] Cf. *paneg.* 88.5, *ep.* VIII.6.2.

[46] Henderson (2011), pp. 160-1 adds that Pompey is an important symbol for another reason: he raises the possibility that the *pro lege Manilia*, with its argument for the concentration of power in the hands of just one man, might be a more positive model for the *Panegyricus* than the fraught *pro Marcello*. Pliny sprinkles his speech with reminiscences of the *pro lege Manilia*; cf. e.g. *paneg.* 28.5 *subsidium bellorum ornamentum pacis* and Cic. *Man. 6 pacis ornamenta et subsidia belli*.

[47] For an excellent analysis of the rhetoric of *paneg.* 30-2, see Lavan (2013), pp. 168-75.

down the proud»: *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (Verg. *Aen.* VI.853)[48]. The paradoxical triumph of an arrogant conquered nation over its captor has been reversed, thanks to Trajan's intervention to stem famine in Egypt. As a consequence, the province must acknowledge she is Rome's slave: *sciat se non esse populo Romano necessario, et tamen seruiat* (*paneg.* 31.3). Derision is heaped on the head of the subject nation. Egypt is "lazy" and the Nile "slow" (*desidem Aegyptum cessantemque Nilum*, *paneg.* 31.5); the country is humiliated (*pudebat*), embarrassed (*erubescebat*) and tormented (*torquebatur*, *paneg.* 31.6). The glorying boast of Egypt (*Aegyptus … gloriata est*, *paneg.* 30.1) is now the glory of Rome: *Nilus … gloriae nostrae numquam largior fluxit* (*paneg.* 31.6). In sum (*paneg.* 31.5-6):

quae [*sc*. annona] tuis opibus, tua cura usque illuc redundauit, ut simul probaretur et nos Aegypto posse et nobis Aegyptum carere non posse. actum erat de fecundissima gente, si libera fuisset.

It is now established that, so far from Rome being dependent on Egypt, it is Egypt who needs Rome. And had she been a "free" rather than an enslaved nation, Egypt would have been "finished"[49]. Pliny, finally, reinforces the language of slavery for all nations (*paneg.* 32.2): «asserting the provinces servile status reaffirms Roman superiority», in the words of Myles Lavan, «by putting the provinces in their place»[50].

Egypt, of course, had survived much worse failures of the flood than the disappointing inundation of 99 A.D., and would do so again (repeatedly). But that is not the point, at least for Pliny. The temporary humiliation of the province is seized on as if it were a comprehensive defeat. Consequently, Trajan's intervention to relieve Egypt is praiseworthy «not because it benefited the province but because it punctured a myth of Roman dependency»[51].

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[48] See Lavan (2013), pp. 170, 246-7. As Christopher Whitton points out to me, the reference is aided by the contrast between Pliny's *uictorem … populum* <u>*pasceret*</u> and Vergil's <u>*parcere*</u> *subiectis*. For important additional references in the immediate context (*paneg.* 30.5, 31.5) to the text of the *Res Gestae diui Augusti* (5.2), and Pliny's desire to create links thereby between Trajan and Augustus, see Magnavacca in this volume.

[49] For the Roman use of the language of slavery to describe provincial submission to Rome, see Lavan (2013), pp. 73-123.

[50] Lavan (2013), p. 173). As Lavan (2013), pp. 168-9 points out, *paneg.* 32 is often quoted for its emphasis on the emperor's concern for the well-being of the provinces; but the broader emphasis in context is on the need to recognize the absolute dependency of the provinces on Rome.

[51] Lavan (2013), p. 174.

7. *Pliny and the Greek east*

The particular character and force of Pliny's attitude towards Egypt can be more fully appreciated if it is set in the context of his broader attitudes to the Greek east. In general, he displays little of the sort of crass anti-Hellenic sentiment that can occasionally be glimpsed in the Elder Pliny, particularly where Greek doctors are concerned[52]. Pliny's perspectives on the Hellenic east, in fact, are not monolithic: he is inconsistent in his attitudes, and apparently open to change through personal contact.

The Younger Pliny served as military tribune in Syria for up to three years during the early 80s A.D., prior to his entry into the senate at the end of the decade[53]. Aside from this one youthful episode, Pliny was, by the standards of his class, little travelled and little experienced outside the Italian peninsula, before appointment to the governorship of Pontus-Bithynia towards the end of his life. He did not, unlike Tacitus, either command a legion or serve as praetorian governor of a province[54]. The *Epistles* supply no evidence of further travel abroad: they are focused very firmly on the Italian peninsula[55]. Yet Pliny is not unthinkingly hostile to Greeks in Italy. He speaks warmly of two philosophers in the city, Artemidorus and Euphrates (*ep.* I.10, III.11). These two are joined by a third, Isaeus, exponent of Greek epideitic rhetoric, whose arrival in Rome is enthusiastically announced in *ep.* II.3. Pliny's «admiration for Isaeus' declamations», in the words of Christopher Whitton, «is exceptional both as a Roman celebration of Greek rhetoric, and as a celebration of show declamation in either language» [56]. On the face of it, this looks as if Pliny were ready to embrace the literary renaissance by then well under way in the Hellenic east that we know as the Second Sophistic. He was not. What unites Isaeus with Artemidorus and Euphrates is Syria. Pliny met the latter pair in the eastern province during his time as military tribune (*ep.* I.10.2, III.11.5). Isaeus, himself from Syria, is

[52] Cf. e.g. Pliny *hn* XXIV.4-6, XXVI.11, XXIX.13-28; Nutton (1986), Beagon (2005), pp. 50-1, Griffin (2007), Doody (2011), pp. 124-6. The Younger goes to great lengths to acquire Roman and Alexandrine citizenship for Arpocras, the medical therapist (*iatraliptes*) from the district of Memphis in Egypt, whom he believed was crucial to his recovery from a serious illness; cf. Pliny *ep.* X.5-7, 10 (with Sherwin White (1966), pp. 566-71, 575-6), and contrast the hostility of the Elder to such specialists (*hn* XXIX.4-5). Note also *ep.* 5.19.6, where Pliny's *lector* Zosimus is sent to Egypt for the good of his health.

[53] On this military tribunate, see Gibson (2020), chapter 8.

[54] On the career of Tacitus, see Birley (2000b).

[55] Pliny's parochialism emerges in the letter on Lake Vadimon: Rome and its environs produce *miracula* that are the equal of anything that people travel to see in Greece, Egypt or Asia (*ep.* VIII.20.2-3).

[56] Whitton (2013), pp. 89-90.

evidently welcomed to Rome on the strength of old ties with the region[57]. It appears likely that none of the trio possessed Roman citizenship. But there is absolutely no suggestion of the slavery of the province and its men to Rome. Pliny treats them largely as his (intellectual) equals, in so far as that was possible for a Roman senator and consul. Plutarch of Chaeronea, by contrast, receives no mention in the *Epistles*. Plutarch's circle of Roman senatorial friends was dominated by northern Italians and *noui homines*: men like Pliny himself. The works of Plutarch and Pliny reveal up to seven shared friends and acquaintances[58]. It is clear, in particular, that both Plutarch and Pliny were personal friends of the Trajanic-era consuls Minicius Fundanus and Sosius Senecio[59]. Yet Pliny finds no place for Plutarch in his cast list of more than one hundred correspondents or the hundreds of others mentioned incidentally in the *Epistles*[60]. A suspicion of an ungenerous attitude towards Greeks not connected to Pliny by youthful patronage hangs over this omission[61].

Plutarch may be ignored, but his home province of Achaea is not. In a notorious letter, Pliny gives advice to a certain Maximus, who is being sent out to Achaea (*ep.* VIII.24)[62]. Maximus is not a regular proconsul, but appears to fall into the special category of *corrector et curator*: he is required by Trajan to intervene in the affairs of the «free cities» (*ciuitates liberae*) who are normally exempt from a governor's control. Pliny reminds him of the special status of the province to which he has been sent: *cogita te missum in prouinciam Achaiam, illam ueram et meram Graeciam, in qua primum humanitas litterae, etiam fruges inuentae esse creduntur; missum ad ordinandum statum liberarum ciuitatum, id est ad homines maxime homines, ad liberos maxime liberos* (*ep.* VIII.24.2). Maximus will encounter the «pure and genuine Greece», home of civilization and literature, where the people are «free in the highest

[57] See Whitton (2013), p. 91 on Isaeus. Behind all three may lie Musonius Rufus, father-in-law of Artemidorus (*ep.* III.11.5) and known associate of Euphrates; see Gibson (2020), chapter 8. Epictetus, another Greek philosopher in Rome also associated with Musonius Rufus, but not from Syria, is ignored in the *Epistles*.

[58] See Jones (1971), pp. 48-64; cf. Stadter (2015), pp. 8-9) on Plutarch's Roman friends more generally.

[59] See Gibson (2018), pp. 407-8 nn. 28, 32.

[60] Only three Greeks receive letters in the entire *Epistles*; all of them were of senatorial rank: Catilius Severus of Apamea in Bithynia (I.22, III.13, IX.22: Apamea was a Roman military colony); Cornutus Tertullus of Perge in Pamphylia (VII.21, VII.31: mentioned also in II.11, II.12, IV.17, V.15, IX.13; *paneg.* 90-1); and Quintilius Valerius Maximus of Alexandria Troas (VIII.24). On their origins, see Syme (1985), pp. 329-30, 355-6; Birley (2000a), pp. 44, 64, 84); Gibson-Morello (2012), pp. 154-7.

[61] On Pliny and Plutarch, see further Gibson (2018).

[62] On this letter, see Syme (1958), p. 80; cf. Syme (1958), p. 85, (1985), pp. 329-30. On the mission of Maximus in Achaea, see Sherwin-White (1966), pp. 478-9.

sense». Yet, as with Egypt in the *Panegyricus*, Pliny introduces the concept of slavery: *reliquam umbram et residuum libertatis nomen eripere durum ferum barbarum est* (*ep.* VIII.24.4). The freedom enjoyed by the Greeks of Achaea is a mere residue, the «name and shadow of *libertas*, and one that can easily be swapped for slavery (cf. *ep.* VIII.24.8 *libertas seruitute mutetur*). «The idea of Greek freedom is a fiction maintained for the benefit of a Greek audience», Myles Lavan remarks, «one that can be dispensed with when the Romans discourse among themselves»[63]. There is, nevertheless, a clear difference from the rhetoric of the *Panegyricus*. The condition of a province in slavery is a matter of celebration in the speech before emperor and senate rather than, as in the letter to Maximus, an issue requiring tact and delicacy.

Pliny mentions in the coda to *ep.* VIII.24 that Maximus has experience of previous imperial service: he was quaestor some years before in Bithynia (VIII.24.8). Pliny has some advice to give on the contrast between Bithynia then and Achaea now: *nitendum est ne in longinqua prouincia quam suburbana, ne inter seruientes quam liberos … humanior melior peritior fuisse uidearis* (*ep.* VIII.24.9). The general lesson is that, unlike Achaea, the province of Bithynia is filled with people who are openly acknowledged (between Romans) as slaves[64]. Such is the "private" rhetoric of the *Epistles*. Yet Pliny's "official" rhetoric in Bithynia, where he would be sent as governor perhaps only two years after the dramatic date of this letter, is subtly different. The correspondence of Book 10 of the *Epistles* with Trajan contains barely an acknowledgement of the Greekness of the inhabitants of Pontus-Bithynia[65]. Pliny's view of his subjects was firmly Roman: the social order of the province is conceived in Roman terms, and the fundamental laws of the province are assumed to be those put in place at the moment of incorporation into the Roman empire[66]. In one sense he anticipates the attitudes of the coming

[63] Lavan (2013), p. 101.

[64] Cf. Lavan (2013), p. 100, «The freedom of [Achaea's] *liberae ciuitates* implies that the rest of Rome's subjects are like slaves (*seruientes*). Thus the rhetoric of freedom serves to reinforce rather than contradict the idea that Rome's subjects are her slaves. Freedom is the exception, not the rule».

[65] On the occluded Greekness of Pliny's province, see Woolf (2006), p. 102: «Trajan at one point (10.40) opines *gymnasiis indulgent Graeculi* and a few Greek institutions are mentioned in passing—*threptoi* (65) and *eranoi* (92)—but in general the specificity of the Bithynians' situation is played down». One of Bithynia's international superstars, Dio of Prusa - yet another associate of Musonius Rufus - is treated with either feigned ignorance or indifference (*ep.* X.81).

[66] The majority of those actually named by Pliny are junior Roman officials working alongside Pliny, plus a few grandees from Bithynian cities bearing names that suggest Roman citizenship; see Woolf (2006), pp. 99-101.

era. In 131-2 A.D., Hadrian founded a Pan-Hellenic league. In the summary of Spawforth and Walker, «admission to the Panhellenion was based on the ability of member-communities to prove their Greekness in terms, not only of culture, but also of race. Thus, since the Greek world viewed mainland Greece as its ethnic homeland, the Panhellenion united within a single institutional framework mother-cities of old Greece and their overseas colonies»[67]. On this criterion, all of the major cities of Bithynia were excluded. Like Hadrian in the next generation, Pliny is happy to recognize the «true and pure Greece» centered around Athens and Sparta, and to turn a blind eye to the claims of Bithynia and her ilk to Greekness. Yet, for all that, there is no overt use of the language of slavery in the letters to Trajan. The inhabitants of Pontus-Bithynia are subject to Roman authority, but they are not treated individually or en masse as slaves.

In sum, Hellenes are not a single entity in Pliny. Syrian Greeks are welcomed with a flourish in Rome. Plutarch of Chaeronea is not. Yet Achaea is made the centre of the Greek world, to the occlusion of the Greekness of Pontus-Bithynia. The inhabitants of Achaea are allowed the «name and shadow of *libertas*»: something that is denied to the citizens of Pontus-Bithynia. In the province, however, Pliny treats the latter as subjects rather than slaves, at least in conceptual terms. How does this contradictory, or at least non-coherent, set of attitudes help us understand Pliny and Egypt in the *Panegyricus*?

8. *Pliny, the Flavians, and Egypt*

Variations in literary genre or immediate contexts go some way to explaining the range of Pliny's attitudes. A graded spectrum of positions can be observed all the same. Egypt is situated at the far extreme of Pliny's spectrum: her humiliation and status as an enslaved province are a matter for public celebration. Why? One answer, as hinted earlier, is to do with the longstanding interest and involvement of the Flavian dynasty with the eastern province. Both Tacitus and Suetonius tell the story of Vespasian's consultation of the oracle of Serapis in Alexandria, eager as he was to learn of his future at a crucial juncture in the civil war then raging in Italy[68]. Details in Suetonius' account point to what was almost certainly, from the Egyptian point of view, an actual Pharaonic coronation of Vespasian in Alexandria[69], even if Vespasian preferred to play that idea down later, out of deference to the role of the senate in

[67] Spawforth-Walker (1985), p. 82.

[68] Tac. *hist.* IV.82, Suet. *Vesp.* 7.1.

[69] See Capriotti Vittozzi (2014), pp. 240-1.

appointing an emperor[70]. Yet Suetonius is clear that Vespasian gained in Alexandria an *auctoritas* and *maiestas* that he had previously lacked, through the performance of miracles of healing (*Vesp.* 7.2-3). The miraculous sudden rise in the Nile, mentioned by Dio, likewise offered an omen that the productive mechanism of the universe would function properly under this prospective emperor[71]. During the civil war, Domitian escaped with his life from the Capitol «disguised in the dress of a follower of Isis» (*Isiaci celatus habitu*, Suet. *Dom.* 1.2)[72]. Vespasian and his other son Titus, now returned to Rome, chose to sleep in the temple of Isis on the Campus Martius on the night before their triumph of 71 A.D[73]. Burnt down in a fire of 80 A.D., the temple was lavishly restored by Domitian[74]. Situated next to the Saepta Iulia, the complex included hieroglyphic inscriptions, a representation of the Nile alongside others of sphinxes and crocodiles, and statues in granite and basalt[75]. Furthermore, the obelisk of Domitian, now in the piazza Navona, contained a hieroglyphic inscription which places the emperor and his Flavian predecessors within the Pharaonic tradition of divine descent[76]. No comparable interest in Egyptian deities would be shown by any Roman emperor until the reign of Commodus[77]. In the summary of one authority, «Egypt mattered to the Flavians and their self-presentation»[78].

This is the context for the extremity of Pliny's rhetoric with regard to Egypt. The Flavian and especially Domitianic devotion to the land of the Nile is put to an end. The dial on relations with Egypt is returned to its Augustan setting: Egypt is enslaved, Rome is the victor[79].

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[70] See Griffin (2000), pp. 4-6 on this point and on the general context for Vespasian's presence in Alexandria.

[71] Dio Cassius 66.8.1 (quoted earlier), with Capriotti Vittozzi (2014), p. 241; cf. Capriotti Vittozzi (2014), pp. 242-3 on the discovery of an Isaic site at Herculaneum associated with Vespasian that includes a cult statue probably intended to mark the significance of the Nile flood that the future emperor witnessed in Alexandria.

[72] See Jones (1996), pp. 14-16 on this passage.

[73] On the interpretation of Josephus, *bell. Iud.* VII.123, see Capriotti Vittozzi (2014), p. 243.

[74] On the cult of Isis in Rome under Domitian, see Lembke (1994), with references to earlier literature.

[75] On the layout of the temple, its location, and numerous finds from the site, see Carandini (2017), vol. I, pp. 517-18, fig.177, 197; vol. II, tab.222-3, 236); cf. Platner-Ashby (1926), pp. 283-5. The obelisk now in front of the Pantheon in modern Rome appears to have come from the site.

[76] See Capriotti Vittozzi (2014), pp. 244-6.

[77] See Jones (1992), pp. 100-1.

[78] Capriotti Vittozzi (2014), p. 257.

[79] The dial, of course, would soon be moved again – by Hadrian. The paranoia to which Hadrian's interest in the country gave rise can be glimpsed in the anti-Egyptian passions of the satirist Juvenal; see Ash (2018), pp. 142-4; cf. Uden (2015), pp. 203-17 on Juvenal's fifteenth satire.

It is hardly irrelevant to point out that Pliny's speech would have particular resonance if it were delivered in the Curia Iulia. According to Dio, writing in the century after Pliny, it was in this traditional meeting place for the senate that Augustus «set up the statue of Victory, which is still in existence, thus signifying probably that it was from her that he had received the empire»: the statue itself was «decked with the spoils of Egypt» (Dio LI.22.2). Pliny need only have gestured to Victory to underline his point as he uttered the words *insolens natio … uictorem quidem populum* (*paneg.* 31.2).

9. *Epilogue*

As Strabo knew, monarchs were judged on their control of rivers. Could they stop overflows? Had they built dams? Would they keep canals clear and free from silt? Could they close up canals to preserve water when river levels dropped in summer? For Strabo, Alexander was exemplary in all these regards (Strabo XVI.1.10-11). Pliny too would judge Trajan on his track record with rivers. In the *Panegyricus*, Trajan is praised for his energetic response to the failure of the Nile to reach the required level to flood the surrounding fields: truly the mark of a great ruler, one who could even make up for the deficiencies in the otherwise miraculous Nile. Later in Trajan's reign, Pliny would grow more pessimistic about his efficacy as a ruler, and he would use rivers to express that pessimism[80].

Trajan is mentioned only twice in Book 8 of the *Epistles*: his presence in the collection markedly declines after Book 6[81]. The second appearance is found in a letter which reports on the flooding of the Tiber: *Tiberis alueum excessit et demissioribus ripis alte superfunditur; quamquam fossa quam prouidentissimus imperator fecit exhaustus, premit ualles, innatat campis, quaque planum solum, pro solo cernitur* (*ep.* VIII.17.2). Unlike the desired inundation of the Nile, the spread of the Tiber beyond its banks onto the level ground on the either side of the river has brought disaster rather than life-giving fertility[82]. By digging a canal to help drain the water, Trajan has shown the imperial virtue of foresight; but the effects of his intervention are nevertheless clearly limited. This partial success at home with taming rivers sets up a

[80] On Pliny's late pessimism about Trajan, and the full argument behind the paragraph below, see Gibson (2015).

[81] See Gibson (2015), pp. 203-4, 207-8, 213-14. For evidence of the measures taken by Trajan to control the Tiber, see Sherwin-White (1966), p. 468).

[82] Pliny ramps up the effect of the Tiber flood with colour and details borrowed from descriptions of flooding in the *Odes* of Horace and in Lucretius; see Guillemin (1929), pp. 120-1, citing (e.g.) Hor. *carm.* I.2, Lucret. II.553-555. She also notes possible resemblances to Tac. *hist.* I.86 and *ann.* I.76 (where the flooding of the Tiber also possesses symbolic significance for reigning emperors).

contrast with the only other passage to include mention of Trajan in Book VIII. In letter VIII.4, Pliny greets with enthusiasm the news that his friend Caninius Rufus has begun an epic poem on the emperor's recent victories in Dacia. The letter commands attention in as much as Pliny is mostly silent on the lengthy Dacian campaigns elsewhere in the *Epistles* - largely with the idea of shifting emphasis away from Trajan the military man to Trajan the *ciuilis princeps*[83]. Pliny describes some of the subject matter which Caninius Rufus might include in his poem: *dices immissa terris noua flumina, nouos pontes fluminibus iniectos, insessa castris montium abrupta … super haec actos bis triumphos …* (*ep.* VIII.4.2). Pliny refers to two famous episodes or features of the Dacian wars[84]. In the first Decebalus, king of the Dacians, diverted the course of a river in order to bury his treasure, only for Trajan to re-divert the river and recover the treasure. Rivers flow beyond their normal course and over the earth once more. In the second Trajan, thanks to his engineer Apollodorus of Damascus, managed to throw a miraculous stone bridge over the Danube, among other riverine conquests. In his two appearances in Book VIII, the emperor's complete success with rivers abroad contrasts with his partial success, and relative failure, in controlling Rome's river at home. The metaphorical potential of the contrast hardly needs spelling out. The journey from Pliny's optimism of 100 A.D. (about Trajan's ability to respond to disaster threatened by the Nile), to the pessimism of *Epistles* Book VIII (about the significance of Trajan's ability to control rivers abroad but not at home), had been a short one. Tacitus was already undertaking the same journey, from the pro-Trajanic enthusiasms of the *Agricola* to the pointed silences and increasing imperial disillusionment of the *Annals*[85].

10. *References*

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[83] See Syme (1964).

[84] Cf. Dio LIVIII.13, 14, also Sherwin-White (1966), p. 451. For a narrative of Trajan's Dacian wars, see Bennett (2001), pp. 85-103.

[85] On this Tacitean journey, see especially Woodman (2009).

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