

7.10 Provincial Administration: Hands-On Style

There is a tendency to think of Roman emperors at best in terms of distant autocrats acting through faceless bureaucrats and at worst as crazed pleasure-lovers acting out their fantasies in gaudy palaces. The reality was much more prosaic, as the following exchange of letters between the Emperor Trajan and his governor in Bithynia [northwestern Turkey], C. Plinius Secundus, shows. Pliny tended to err on the side of caution, forever sending cases to the emperor which a more resolute (or perhaps unscrupulous) governor might have settled on the spot, in consultation with his consilium.

The case reveals a lot about life in the provinces, at least among the upper classes. Flavius Archippus, a philosopher of somewhat dubious reputation, had ingratiated himself with the previous emperor Domitian, but when Domitian was assassinated, his enemies, led by a woman named Furia Prima, got busy and tried to have him condemned to hard labor in the mines. Archippus had kept good records and was able to fight back effectively. Clearly, he had been a strong supporter of the previous Flavian regime (as his name suggests) and had cashed

⁹Satires 3.58–107.

in on his position, alienating and victimizing in the process a number of his fellow townsmen. Furia Prima had evidently suffered in some way at his hands. Pliny takes no chances and lets the emperor handle the situation.

The styles of the Emperors Domitian and Trajan contrast with the pomposity of Nerva, who reigned briefly after the death of Domitian. The shrewd reading of the evidence by Trajan and his laconic comment regarding Furia Prima's complaint are of interest. His message to Pliny was: "Tell Furia I've read her letter, and I don't want to hear any more on this subject."¹⁰

Letter of Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

Sir: When I called the jurors to attend the hearings, Flavius Archippus claimed to be exempted because he was a philosopher. However, some people present said that indeed, not only should he be freed from jury service, but his name should be removed altogether from the jurors' list and that he should be shipped back to the prison from which he had escaped, to complete his sentence. In support of this the judgment of the proconsul Velius Paullus was read. According to this document Archippus had been condemned to the mines for forgery. While Archippus could not prove that the sentence had been reversed, he produced as evidence of his reinstatement a petition he had submitted to the Emperor Domitian along with letters from Domitian honoring him, and a decree in his honor from the people of Prusa. To these he added a letter written by you to him as well as an edict and a letter of our father [*the Emperor Nerva*] confirming the grants made to him by Domitian.

Accordingly, although such charges have been made against him, I thought nothing should be decided until I had first consulted with you. The case seemed to deserve your special attention. I attach to this letter the documents cited by the two parties. *The documents are as follows:*

1. The Letter of the Emperor Domitian to Terentius Maximus [*the emperor's agent in Bithynia*]

In response to the request of Flavius Archippus the philosopher I have ordered that up to 100,000 sesterces be made available to purchase land for him near Prusa, his native town. The income from this land is for the support of his family. I wish this to be done for him. The full amount is to be written off as an expression of my generosity.

2. The Letter from the Emperor Domitian to L. Appius Maximus [*proconsul of Bithynia under Domitian*]

My dear Maximus, I recommend Archippus the philosopher to you as a good person whose character is in harmony with his calling. Please show him every kindness in granting the small requests he may make of you.

3. The Edict of the Emperor Nerva

Citizens: There are some matters in which in happy times like ours there is no need of an edict, and equally other matters in which the intentions of a good emperor

¹⁰Letters of Pliny 10.58; 59; 60.

cannot but be clearly understood. I want every one of my citizens to know that I gave up my private life in response to the needs of all. I did so in order to dispense gladly new benefits, and to confirm those of my predecessor.

In order that your public rejoicings may not be spoiled by the misgivings of those who received favors, or because of the memory of the emperor who bestowed them [*the assassination of Domitian had apparently raised fears that Nerva might rescind his acts*], I thought it necessary and agreeable to dispel these doubts by a manifest act of kindness: No one is to think that I will withdraw any of the benefits, either public or private, bestowed by other emperors in order to claim the credit of restoring them for myself. They are fully ratified. Let no one on whom the Good Fortune of the Empire has smiled think his joy needs to apply for a renewal of petitions. On the contrary, give me the opportunity to bestow new favors; let it be known that I need only to be asked for those benefits which have not already been granted.

4. Letter of Nerva to Tullius Justus [*proconsul of Bithynia under Nerva*]

The governmental regulations, whether merely initiated or completed under previous regimes, are to be observed. Accordingly, the letters of Domitian remain valid.

Pliny's Covering Letter to the Emperor Trajan

Flavius Archippus has asked me, by your prosperity and immortality, to forward the petition which he has presented to me. I thought I should do this though I should also let his prosecutor [*Furia Prima*] know I was doing this. She has also given me a petition which I am attaching to this letter. This way, by hearing each side, you might be better able to decide what should be done.

Response of Trajan to Pliny

It is possible that Domitian might not have known the status of Archippus when he wrote all those letters in his favor. However, I think it more reasonable to believe that Archippus was in reality restored to his former status by Domitian's intervention. This is especially likely since the people of Prusa, who could not have been ignorant of the sentence against him by the proconsul Paulus, so often voted him the honor of a statue. But I do not mean to suggest, my dear Pliny, that if any new charges are brought against him, you should be slow to hear them.

I have read the petitions of Furia Prima, his accuser, as well as those of Archippus, which you sent me with your second letter.

7.11 How Patronage Worked

Pliny cultivated his patron Corellius Rufus when he entered public life and in turn supported Rufus, helped defend his family and relatives, and worked to protect his reputation. When Rufus died, Pliny took up the defense of his daughter, Corellia, who had some legal problems