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# Ancient History Sourcebook: Pliny and Trajan: Correspondence, c. 112 CE

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## [Davis Introduction]

*About 112 CE. Trajan appointed Pliny the Younger, a distinguished Senator and literary man, as governor of Bithynia -- a province suffering from previous maladministration. The nature of the governor's problems and the obligation he was under of referring very petty matters to the Emperor appears clearly in the following letters. This correspondence of Trajan and Pliny (given here only in small part) is among the most valuable bits of historical data we have for the whole Imperial Age.*

## **Pliny the Younger: *Letters*, X.25 ff: The Correspondence of a Provincial Governor and the Emperor**

### ***Pliny to Trajan:***

The people of Prusa, Sire, have a public bath in a neglected and dilapidated state. They wish - with your kind permission -- to restore it; but I think a new one ought to be built, and I reckon you can safely comply with their wishes. [Then the governor names various ways to find the money, especially cutting down the free distribution of oil.]

### ***Trajan to Pliny:***

If the building of a new bath will not cripple the finances of Prusa, we can indulge their wishes; only it must be understood that no new taxes are to be raised to meet the cost, and that their contributions for necessary expenses shall not show any falling off.\*

### ***Pliny to Trajan:***

A desolating fire broke out in Nicomedia, and destroyed a number of private houses, and two public buildings -- the almshouse and the temple of Isis -- although a road ran

between them. The fire was allowed to spread farther than it need, first owing to the violent wind; second, to the laziness of the citizens, it being generally agreed they stood idly by without moving, and simply watched the conflagration. Besides there was not a single public fire engine or bucket in the place, and not one solitary appliance for mastering a fire. However, these will be provided upon orders I have already given. But, Sire, I would have you consider whether you think a fire company of about 150 men ought not to be formed? I will take care that no one not a genuine fireman shall be admitted, and that the guild should not misapply the charter granted it. Again there would be no trouble in keeping an eye on so small a body.

***Trajan to Pliny:***

You have formed the idea of a possible fire company at Nicomedia on the model of various others already existing; but remember that the province of Bithynia, and especially city-states like Nicomedia, are the prey of factions. Give them the name we may, and however good be the reasons for organization, such associations will soon degenerate into dangerous secret societies. It is better policy to provide fire apparatus, and to encourage property holders to make use of them, and if need comes, press the crowd which collects into the same service.

***Pliny to Trajan:***

Sire, the people of Nicomedia spent 3,229,000 sesterces [Arkenberg: about \$1,857,000 in 1998 dollars] upon an aqueduct, which was left in an unfinished state, and I may say in ruin, and they also levied taxes to the extent of 2,000,000 sesterces [Arkenberg: about \$1,543,000 in 1998 dollars] for a second one. This, too, has been abandoned, and to get a water supply those who have wasted these vast sums must go to a new expense. I have visited a splendid clear spring, from which it seems to me the supply ought to be brought to the town [and have formed a scheme that seems practicable].

***Trajan to Pliny:***

Steps must certainly be taken to provide Nicomedia with a water supply; and I have full confidence you will undertake the duty with all due care. But I profess it is also part of your diligent duty to find out who is to blame for the waste of such sums of money by the people of Nicomedia on their aqueducts, and whether or no there has been any serving of private interests in this beginning and then abandoning of [public] works. See that you bring to my knowledge whatever you find out.

***Pliny to Trajan:***

The theater at Nicaea, Sire, the greater part of which has already been constructed --

though it is still unfinished -- has already cost over 10,000,000 sesterces [Arkenberg: about \$7,500,000 in 1998 dollars] -- at least so I am told, for the accounts have not been made out; and I am fearful lest the money has been thrown away. For the building has sunk and there are great gaping crevices to be seen, either because the ground is damp, or owing to the [bad quality] of the stone. [It is doubtful if the affair is worth completing.] Just before I came the Nicaeans also began to restore the public gymnasium, which had been destroyed by fire, on a larger scale than the old building, and they have already disbursed a considerable sum thereon, and I fear to little purpose [for it is very ill constructed]. Moreover the architect -- the rival, to be sure, of the man who began the work -- asserts that the walls, although twenty-two feet thick, cannot bear the weight placed upon them, because they have not been put together with cement in the middle and have not been strengthened with brickwork.

***Trajan to Pliny:***

You are the best judge of what to do at Nicaea. It will be enough for me to be informed of the plan you adopt. All Greek peoples have a passion for gymnasia, so perhaps the people of Nicaea have set about building one on a rather lavish scale, but they must be content to cut their coat according to their cloth. You again must decide what advice to give the people of Claudiopolis.

***Pliny to Trajan:***

When I asked for a statement of the expenditures of the city of Byzantium -- which are abnormally high -- it was pointed out to me, Sire, that a delegate was sent every year with a complimentary decree to pay his respects to you, and that he received 12,000 sesterces for so doing. Remembering your instructions I ordered him to stay at home and to forward the decree by me in order to lighten the expenses. I beg you to tell whether I have done right.

***Trajan to Pliny:***

You have done quite right, my dear Pliny, in canceling the expenditure of the Byzantines. . . for that delegate. They will in the future do their duty well enough, even though the decree alone is sent me through you.

***Pliny to Trajan:***

Sire, a person named Julius Largus of Pontus, whom I have never seen or heard of before, has intrusted me with the management of his property with which he seeks to prove his loyalty to you. For he has asked me in his will to undertake as heir the division of his property, and after keeping 50,000 sesterces, hand over all the remainder to the free cities

of Heraclea and Teos. He leaves it to my discretion whether I think it better to erect public works and dedicate them to your glory, or to start an athletic festival, to be held every five years, and to be called the "Trajan Games." I have decided to lay the facts before you and ask your decision.

### **Trajan to Pliny:**

Julius Largus, in picking you out for your trustworthiness, has acted as though he knew you intimately. So do you consider the circumstances of each place, and the best means of perpetuating his memory, and follow the course you think best.

### **Pliny to Trajan:**

It is my custom, Sire, to refer to you in all cases where I am in doubt, for who can better clear up difficulties and inform me? I have never been present at any legal examination of the Christians, and I do not know, therefore, what are the usual penalties passed upon them, or the limits of those penalties, or how searching an inquiry should be made. I have hesitated a great deal in considering whether any distinctions should be drawn according to the ages of the accused; whether the weak should be punished as severely as the more robust, or whether the man who has once been a Christian gained anything by recanting? Again, whether the name of being a Christian, even though otherwise innocent of crime, should be punished, or only the crimes that gather around it?

In the meantime, this is the plan which I have adopted in the case of those Christians who have been brought before me. I ask them whether they are Christians, if they say "Yes," then I repeat the question the second time, and also a third -- warning them of the penalties involved; and if they persist, I order them away to prison. For I do not doubt that -- be their admitted crime what it may -- their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy surely ought to be punished.

There were others who showed similar mad folly, whom I reserved to be sent to Rome, as they were Roman citizens. Later, as is commonly the case, the mere fact of my entertaining the question led to a multiplying of accusations and a variety of cases were brought before me. An anonymous pamphlet was issued, containing a number of names of alleged Christians. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians and called upon the gods with the usual formula, reciting the words after me, and those who offered incense and wine before your image -- which I had ordered to be brought forward for this purpose, along with the regular statues of the gods -- all such I considered acquitted -- especially as they cursed the name of Christ, which it is said *bona fide* Christians cannot be induced to do.

Still others there were, whose names were supplied by an informer. These first said they

were Christians, then denied it, insisting they had been, "but were so no longer"; some of them having "recanted many years ago," and more than one "full twenty years back." These all worshiped your image and the god's statues and cursed the name of Christ.

But they declared their guilt or error was simply this -- on a fixed day they used to meet before dawn and recite a hymn among themselves to Christ, as though he were a god. So far from binding themselves by oath to commit any crime, they swore to keep from theft, robbery, adultery, breach of faith, and not to deny any trust money deposited with them when called upon to deliver it. This ceremony over, they used to depart and meet again to take food -- but it was of no special character, and entirely harmless. They also had ceased from this practice after the edict I issued -- by which, in accord with your orders, I forbade all secret societies.

I then thought it the more needful to get at the facts behind their statements. Therefore I placed two women, called "deaconesses," under torture, but I found only a debased superstition carried to great lengths, so I postponed my examination, and immediately consulted you. This seems a matter worthy of your prompt consideration, especially as so many people are endangered. Many of all ages and both sexes are put in peril of their lives by their accusers; and the process will go on, for the contagion of this superstition has spread not merely through the free towns, but into the villages and farms. Still I think it can be halted and things set right. Beyond any doubt, the temples -- which were nigh deserted -- are beginning again to be thronged with worshipers; the sacred rites, which long have lapsed, are now being renewed, and the food for the sacrificial victims is again finding a sale -- though up to recently it had almost no market. So one can safely infer how vast numbers could be reclaimed, if only there were a chance given for repentance.

## **Trajan to Pliny**

You have adopted the right course, my dear Pliny, in examining the cases of those cited before you as Christians; for no hard and fast rule can be laid down covering such a wide question. The Christians are not to be hunted out. If brought before you, and the offense is proved, they are to be punished, but with this reservation -- if any one denies he is a Christian, and makes it clear he is not, by offering prayer to our gods, then he is to be pardoned on his recantation, no matter how suspicious his past. As for anonymous pamphlets, they are to be discarded absolutely, whatever crime they may charge, for they are not only a precedent of a very bad type, but they do not accord with the spirit of our age.

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## **Source:**

From: William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: *Rome and the West*, 196-210, 215-222, 250-251, 289-290, 295-296, 298-300.

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