

## Pliny the Younger and the Role of the Governor in Imperial Communication

Examining the pattern of official communication within the province of Bithynia-Pontus during the governorship of Pliny the Younger reveals how that structure served to make the governor a central “gatekeeper” for information being conveyed to the emperor. Most studies of imperial communication have either explored the practicalities of the imperial post (*cursus publicus*) (Kolb 2001; Riepl 1913, 123-240) or the system of imperial petition and response with its necessary bureaucracy (Honoré 1981; Hauken 1998). Such focuses, however, neglect the role of the governor himself as an agent of communication.

The letters of the younger Pliny to Trajan provide a treasure trove of data with which to examine the role of the *legatus Augusti* in communication. Here a theoretical model is useful in reconstructing the ways in which emperor, governor, other imperial officials, and provincials communicated. Network theory, as explained by Wasserman and Faust (1994, 4-5), can serve this purpose and employs two basic axioms, that (1) “actors and their actions are viewed as interdependent” and (2) “relational ties (linkages) between actors are channels for transfer or ‘flow’ of resources.” Constructing a network model of communications out of Pliny’s correspondence allows us to identify the most direct—and therefore efficient and effective—means of forwarding business to the emperor. Such a model of communications efficiency has several important ramifications.

First, an imperial governor would have generally possessed a very direct and efficient line of communication to the emperor because of his senior status and access to the *cursus publicus* (for which, see Casson 1974, 182-4; Williams 1990, 105-6). As a result, those individuals without direct access to the post would have found it advantageous to have their business forwarded through the governor except when he did not respond sympathetically or the

matter was of the utmost urgency (e.g., Josephus' delegation to Gaius after riots in Alexandria in AD 38/39). Second, a network model of provincial communications predicts that those individuals who had access to the *cursus* in their own right and were not directly subordinate to the governor would have had little or no need to use the governor as an intermediary, unless social or political expediency demanded it.

The letters of Pliny bear out this model. We see provincials, cities, and embassies forwarding business through him regularly (e.g., the dispute involving Flavius Archippus' legal status, *Ep.* 10.58-60) and generally do not find his fellow provincial administrators consulting him except when asking a favor or clarifying a matter relevant to them both (e.g., Gavius Bassus, the prefect of the Pontic shore, asking for more soldiers for his retinue, *Ep.* 10.21; *loc. cit.* in Sherwin-White 1966 and Williams 1990). The governor's role in correspondence allowed him to function not only as an administrator, but also as a crucial link in the flow of information throughout the imperial bureaucracy, ensuring that the emperor received timely, trustworthy notices of business in the provinces.

Indeed, in addition to forwarding petitions and questions, the letters of Pliny also reveal a tendency for him to pass on notices or requests for permission that seem purely informational (*Ep.* 10.15, 17a, 21, 25, 120) or primarily *pro forma* (*Ep.* 10.23, 54, 70, 90, 98). In these, Trajan often directly echoes Pliny's assessment of the situation, which further underscores Pliny's role as a primary source of information about the province. Since access to the *cursus* was limited and social or political propriety often demanded that business be routed through the governor even when a right of direct access to the emperor existed, the governor became a crucial point of contact for the other magistrates, bureaucrats, and residents of a province.

In light of recent scholarship that has argued for the normative nature of Pliny's governorship (Noreña 2007; Sherwin-White 1962), we can generalize from his example and regard the governor as a crucial lynchpin in how communication between emperor and subject occurred.

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