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The Netherlands

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Janssen, K.P.S.; Breed, B.; Furey, C.M.; Gemeinhardt, P.; LeMon, J.M.; Römer, T. Chr.; ... ; Ziolkowski, E.

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Pliny the Younger

Renske Janssen

The nephew and later posthumously adopted son of the famous naturalist Pliny the Elder, Pliny the Younger, was born in Novum Comum (northern Italy) around 61 CE. He was an equestrian by rank, starting his political career during the reign of Domitian, whom he would later unfavourably compare to Emperor Trajan in his *Panegyricus*. Around 110 CE (Gibson/Morello: 269) Trajan named Pliny governor of the province Bithynia-Pontus. Pliny was tasked with restoring order in that province which had proved troublesome for previous governors and was plagued by financial difficulties (Corke-Webster: 378–79, 389; Gibson: 197–99). Parts of his reports to the emperor survive in the tenth book of his *Epistulae* (*Ep.* 10), and despite likely being more strongly edited than previously believed, the core of the correspondence is generally considered to be largely authentic, especially when compared to the more overtly literary *Ep.* 1–9 (Stadter). As such, they provide invaluable insights into Roman provincial administration, and the role of letter-writing therein.

Most famous among Pliny's activities as governor were his interactions with the Christians in his province that are documented in *Ep.* 10.96 (Pliny's long letter) and 10.97 (Trajan's brief reply). These letters provide a uniquely direct insight into the way in which trials against Christians were conducted. They show that, at this point in time, there was no general "law against Christians." Pliny thus expresses his uncertainty regarding the correct approach before explaining the various steps he has taken and the reasoning behind them. These descriptions of legal procedures are central to Pliny's account and famously include his attempts to determine whether Christians should be punished for being Christian (the *nomen ipsum*) or for crimes associated with their religious beliefs (*flagitia cohaerentia nomini*), as well as his decision to allow Christians the opportunity to renounce their beliefs so as to escape punishment. The letters furthermore show that Pliny only took action against the Christians after he had been prompted to do so by the local population. Meanwhile, the emperor's involvement was limited to confirming that his governor had acted correctly in his careful approach before then concluding that it was impossible to establish a universally valid procedure and mandating that Christians were not to be actively sought out (Janssen: 252–64).

Pliny's letters also serve as one of the earliest sources on early Christianity from a Roman perspective. He hints that accusations of cannibalism may have been brought forward – likely resulting from a common Roman misunderstanding of the Eucharist (see "Lord's Supper") – but after conducting his own investigations ultimately concludes that no crimes had been committed.

His description of these inquiries provides valuable insights into Christian community life, and serves as external evidence for women's ability to serve as deaconesses and for familiar customs like the singing of hymns and the taking of communal meals.

In spite of their important status in modern scholarship, however, it is unlikely that Pliny's letters established a fixed procedure for later trials against Christians, and Roman governors were apparently quite free to pursue enquiries and make their own decisions. Subsequent proceedings were much more diverse than is often assumed (Tertullian, *Scap.* 4), and until the middle of the 4th century CE, we only ever find explicit references to the letters in the works of the Christian authors Tertullian (*Apol.* 2.6–2.7) and Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.33; Corke-Webster: 399). The legacy of Pliny's correspondence as a precedent for legal procedures against Christians was thus more strongly shaped by Christian tradition than by any reception by the Roman authorities themselves.

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