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The works of Pliny the Younger present a pleasant variety and are relevant to all students of the literature, social history, mental history, and even archeology of the Roman empire. A volume of papers on Pliny the Younger that includes a broad range of topics and approaches is, therefore, a promising enterprise. Unfortunately, this new volume does not meet the high expectations raised by its broad title. The book does not attempt to take a fresh look at Pliny by means of a special focus or method, nor does it aspire to form an introduction to Pliny and his world or to offer a synthesis of recent Plinian studies. It rather brings together a number of diverse essays, conveniently grouped under various headings but hardly forming a coherent whole and only occasionally producing new insights.

As the editors' names already indicate, the volume is the result of a cooperation between Italian and German scholars. The papers were originally presented during a colloquium in Menaggio, at Lake Como, from May, 29th. to June, 1st., 2002. Twenty-one papers have been included (eleven by Germans, ten by Italians), which split into eight groups: Literature (5 papers), Rhetoric (4), Values (3), 'Transpadana' (2), Trajan (3), History and economy (2), Villas (1) and Reception (1). The division of papers into these groups is, as may be expected, somewhat arbitrary at times, but it guides the reader to pieces that are most relevant to his or her interests.

The section on literature is opened by U. Auhagen with a rather disappointing paper on Pliny's hendecasyllabi. Pliny's poetry is considered the work of a dilettante, that is, much as Pliny says himself and as most readers would agree after having read his verses for the first time. That Pliny made poetry for amusement during his hours of leisure, and perhaps also to acquire some glory, does not really come as a new thought to any reader of Pliny's texts. One can read as much in the letters themselves.

Other papers in the Literature section cannot be said to move Plinian studies significantly further either. For example, in his discussion of Pliny's sententiae, M. Vielberg shows that there is a difference between the sententiae of the letter books 1 to 9, where they are used in a varied manner, and of the Panegyricus, where they are used only in the name of the speaker and need further authority and legitimization by the addressed person, Trajan. The 10th book of letters functions as a kind of bridge between both extremes. But the content of the books makes it all but impossible not to draw this conclusion.

Another paper in this section deals with Pliny and the theatre (G. Petrone), while two further papers discuss Pliny's self-representation (J. Radicke; G. Vogt-Spira), much in the line of full-length studies such as M. Ludolph, Epistolographie und Selbstdarstellung. Untersuchungen zu den 'Paradebriefen' Plinius des Jüngeren, Tübingen 1997 (duly quoted by both).

The section on Rhetoric contains papers on Pliny's remarks about historical and rhetorical
style (T. Baier), on Pliny as a writer who is consciously different from Quintilian (P. Cova), on some of his ideas about rhetoric (P. Cugusi), and on Pliny as a defender of senatorial virtues (R. Gazich), such as helping one's friends, restoring traditional values, and giving the good example. In fact, this last paper might well have been included in the next section.

In the third section, on Values, L. Castagna sketches a rather conventional image of Pliny's ideas and practice of friendship. Once again, one has the feeling that the conclusion of the author can easily be gathered from reading the letters themselves. The notion of an 'ideal man' in the times of Trajan (G. Biffino), and Pliny's complaint about the lost dignitas of the Senate (E. Lefèvre) are the focus of the two remaining papers in this section.

One of the more inspiring contributions to the volume is that by G. Manuwald, who, in the section on Transpadana, discusses Pliny's 'liberalitas' with regard to his native land and particularly the city of Comum. It is often assumed that Pliny donated his generous gifts merely in order to obtain fame and glory for himself, as immortalized by himself in his own letters. Manuwald admits that this factor is indeed important but argues that Pliny may have acted from genuine concern for the well-being of his native city and its citizens as well. This is a sympathetic correction of the commonly held view. Equally valuable is S. Mratschek's paper on Pliny and the rebirth of literature in the Transpadana, which studies Pliny in the context of a wider literary circle in Northern Italy. The number of her footnotes (131) is perhaps a little exaggerated, but they contain useful material.

The fifth and sixth sections, on Trajan and Economy, contain much that is conventional and one surprise. The conventional is represented e.g. by D. Lassandro in a paper on the Panegyricus with its 'concentus laudum' of the emperor that made it the example for later panegyrics, and by G. Mazzoli, who in his paper on the relationship between the Panegyricus and the 10th book of letters touches upon an interesting theme, but fails to say anything substantial. Yes, in Paneg. 79.6 Pliny suggests that the emperor is never late in giving replies, and in 87.3-5 that one keeps one's position with Trajan even at a distance, two notions that clearly inspire his own letters to Trajan from Bithynia, but is that really the most important thing to say about the relationship between these texts?

Inevitably, the famous letter to Trajan on the Christians is also discussed (by M. Sordi) in a rather meagre contribution. First, it focuses upon the contradiction between Pliny's concern to have Christians pay divine honours to the emperor, and Trajan's own apparent rejection of such honours. The second half of the paper is taken up by a discussion of the term 'sacramentum', as a sequel to an earlier specialised article by the same author from 1982.

Of course, Pliny's works also form an important source for historians. As if to underscore the persistence of this interest, the volume has a rather long paper by E. Lo Cascio, who draws some general conclusions about the economy of Italy on the basis of Pliny's letters. This is, of course, more than excusable in a volume with such clearly regional, Italian interests, although it is not bound to fascinate all students of Pliny alike.

The 'surprise' of the book comes almost at the end, one might almost say, 'in cauda venenum'. K. Strobel discusses Pliny's relationship with Domitian, a somewhat painful subject given Pliny's flourishing career under Domitian and his subsequent distancing from the 'hated, cruel tyrant'. Few readers will argue that Pliny played a heroic, exemplary role here, but Strobel drives home the point by making Pliny look like a 'Wendehals', such as German culture has seen more often after 1945 and most recently after 1989, the end of the German Democratic Republic (DDR). Interestingly, present day concerns come in rather strongly here: in what contribution on Pliny does one ever come across terms like Stalinism or de-Stalinization? Strobel clearly makes his point that Pliny had been a helper of Domitian and in the next phase changed his politics and loyally served Trajan, without ever becoming more than 'third rank'. Although the article does not amount to a full-scale 'debunking' of Pliny (he is not outrightly condemned, but merely said to be anything but a hero or model figure), it comes closer to this than all the rest of the book. Meanwhile, as stimulating as the paper is, one may ask to what
extent it advances our understanding of Pliny. Yes, from a German perspective, Pliny may well have been a 'Wendehals', but so what? What does it learn us about Pliny himself? How did the Romans themselves appreciate such behaviour? Strobel touches upon the case of Tacitus, whose career is comparable, but, regrettably, does not elaborate on it. More can and will surely be said here.

The last two papers are for specialists only. H. Mielsch discusses Pliny's villa's in a largely archaeological context, and F. Römer analyses a 16th century verse adaptation of Pliny's letter 3.5 about his uncle. There is no general conclusion or synthesis, and an index locorum of Pliny's works only closes the volume.

As with every collection of papers, some items seem more interesting than others, and differences in style and method easily spring to the eye. There is no reason for special complaints here. Papers such as those by Manuwald and Strobel were instructive and helpful to me, but I am sure that other ones will be preferred by other readers. The volume is, on the whole, well-organized and has been carefully edited.

I have no complaints either about the technical quality of the papers. Most of them are well documented and thorough in their approach. Some people might call them 'traditional', in their cautious, philological precision, their love of detail, and their ample discussion of primary and secondary sources, often quoted or paraphrased at length. Also typical is a certain hesitation to adopt either modern theory or provocative ideas as a starting point or working hypothesis. Although such an approach no longer seems fashionable to many classicists, notably in the Anglo-Saxon world, it can produce valuable results. In the best cases, it presents illuminating surveys, that enable the reader to get a better understanding of the material that is presented, particularly if this material would have been difficult to assemble or overlook without special help. But if papers organized along these 'traditional' lines are to achieve this positive effect, their basic questions and results should move beyond what seems evident to anyone who has even the briefest of looks at the material itself.

It is on this level that the collection of essays falls short. Too many papers have been included that hardly seem to advance our knowledge and merely seem to repeat and summarize Pliny's texts and to follow earlier scholarly contributions (including those by the modern authors themselves), or that seem to have been included in honour of scholars who have written them. With a few, notable exceptions, these papers do not raise controversial or new issues, and as a result they are unlikely to inspire further research. On a linguistic note, it is somewhat curious to find only German and Italian papers here, with the resulting focus on scholarly contributions in those languages. Certainly, the English speaking world, to mention only one, has far from neglected Pliny. One may easily observe this in a recent issue of Arethusa, (36.2 (2003)), with a series of thought-provoking contributions on Pliny, edited by R. Morello and Roy K. Gibson, or in the recent study of The Anxieties of Pliny the Younger by Stanley Hoffer (1999).

This volume on Pliny will be useful for professional libraries and it will find its way among specialists of the author. The general audience of classicists, however, let alone beginning readers, are probably better advised to look elsewhere for modern critical approaches of Pliny.