

ARCTOS

ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

VOL. XII

HELSINKI 1978 HELSINGFORS

I N D E X

Jaakko Frösén	Le transport du blé et le rôle des ἐπίπλοοι.....	5
Paavo Hohti	Einige Bemerkungen über die Aischines-Papyri.....	19
Iiro Kajanto	The Hereafter in Ancient Christian Epigraphy and Poetry.....	27
Saara Lilja	Descriptions of Human Appearance in Pliny's Letters.....	55
Ulla Nyberg	Über inschriftliche Abkürzungen der gotischen und humanistischen Schriftperioden.....	63
Martti Nyman	On the Alleged Variation <i>dēlēniō</i> ~ <i>dēlīniō</i>	81
Teivas Oksala	Warum wollte Vergil die Aeneis verbrennen?.....	89
Tuomo Pekkanen	Critical and Exegetical Notes on Tac. Germ.	101
Leena Pietilä-Castrén	Some Aspects of the Life of Lucius Mummius Achaicus.....	115
Eeva Ruoff-Väänänen	The Roman Senate and Criminal Jurisdiction during the Roman Republic.....	125
Juhani Sarsila	Some Notes on <i>virtus</i> in Sallust and Cicero.....	135
Heikki Solin	Analecta epigraphica L - LVI.....	145
Holger Thesleff	Notes on the New Epicharmean 'Iatrology'.....	153
Toivo Viljamaa	Livy 1,47,1-7: A Note on the Historical Infinitive.....	159
Henrik Zilliacus	Euripides Medeia 214-221 und Ennius	167
De novis libris iudicia	173

DESCRIPTIONS OF HUMAN APPEARANCE
IN PLINY'S LETTERS

S a a r a L i l j a

Pliny's account of the floating islands on Lake Vadimon, in a letter addressed to Gallus (8,20), ends with this comment: *nam te quoque ut me nihil aeque ac naturae opera delectant*. Pliny's own interest in nature is understandable, when one thinks of the scholarly zeal of his uncle in producing such a large-scale work as the Natural History. We do not know anything specific with regard to Gallus' interest in nature,¹ but it can be said that a certain general curiosity about natural phenomena seems to have been in the air at that time, witness not only the Natural History of Pliny the Elder, but also Seneca's Natural Questions.

In addition to a taste for natural wonders, many of Pliny's letters reveal an aesthetic appreciation of nature as well. The latter aspect is most prominent in his descriptions of villas and their settings.² In spite of his great interest in nature in its wild as well as cultivated forms, Pliny was less impressed by the outward appearance of human beings. He thus resembles modern biologists, many of whom speak of nature as a clear-cut contrast to

1 Especially as he cannot be identified for certain: see A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, Oxford 1966, pp. 186, 294 and 471.

2 Above all his own Laurentine villa (2,17) and his Tuscan villa (5,6). The most notable of other relevant letters are the accounts of Lake Larius (4,30) and Lake Vadimon (8,20), of the Clitumnus springs (8,8), and of the dolphin of Hippo (9,33), not to mention the famous Vesuvius letters (6,16 and 6,20).

human beings, as though man were not part of nature. In antiquity this was as much the normal attitude of the inhabitants of a big city as it is today.



Pliny's eulogy of his young wife Calpurnia, in a letter addressed to her aunt (4,19), is concerned entirely with her mental qualities, and it is this point he also emphasizes in her love towards himself: *non enim aetatem meam aut corpus, quae paulatim occidunt ac senescunt, sed gloriam diligit* (§ 5). One cannot, of course, take offence at a husband attaching importance to his young wife's mental faculties, but adding a word about her appearance would, one feels, not have come amiss. The diminutive form *corpusculum* in Pliny's letter to Calpurnia, when she has left him alone for the first time in order to visit Campania, may be partly affectionate, though the context shows that it refers mainly to the wanness caused by her illness: *simul esse cupiebam, ut oculis meis crederem, quid viribus, quid corpusculo appareres* (6,4,2).³ There are two further descriptions of female qualities which concentrate wholly on the intellectual aspect, namely, the eulogy of Fundanus' daughter who had died at the age of thirteen (5,16) and that of Fannia (7,19). In the former, it is true, Pliny remarks in passing (§ 9) that Fundanus' daughter had resembled her father not only in character, but also in outward appearance, although, in fact, we know nothing about the father's looks. Only on one occasion does Pliny praise a lady's outward appearance, namely, the youthful constitution of an old lady who does not look her nearly eighty years: *viridis atque etiam ultra matronalem modum compacto corpore et robusto* (7,24,1).

The references to male beauty are more numerous. In a passage

³ The same diminutive form is used by Trajan (10,18), when he speaks of Pliny's debilitated appearance due to the hot climate and subsequent fever. In both these contexts, however, the diminutive might perhaps simply reflect a more colloquial style.

mentioning the death of Arria's son, he is described by Pliny as *filius - - eximia pulchritudine* (3,16,3). Another young man is *conspicuus forma* (7,24,3), and a third one characterized by his *eximia corporis pulchritudo* (3,3,4).⁴ The longest description of male beauty is found in a letter where Pliny recommends Minicius Acilianus, a young man of his acquaintance, as a suitable husband for Mauricus' niece: *est illi facies liberalis multo sanguine, multo rubore suffusa, est ingenua totius corporis pulchritudo et quidam senatorius decor* (1,14,8). While the adjectives *liberalis*, *ingenuus* and *senatorius* describe the young man's noble gentility in a general way, *facies* and *totius corporis pulchritudo* refer to his good looks more specifically. Such effusive praise for Minicius' beauty is so exceptional that Pliny thinks it necessary to add this explanation: *quae ego nequaquam arbitror negligenda; debet enim hoc castitati puellarum quasi praemium dari.*⁵

One detail about Minicius' countenance is of particular interest, namely, that his face was *multo sanguine, multo rubore suffusa* (1,14,8). This fact might refer not only to the young man's healthiness and physical vigour, but also to his emotional sensitivity. I am reminded of a passage where Pliny analyzes those characteristics that enhance the qualities of a good orator in court, one of them being *omnibus motibus animi consentaneus vigor corporis* (2,19,2). Minicius' ruddy countenance might further reveal the young man's decent bashfulness. When praising the recital of Calpurnius Piso, Pliny mentions as an important detail *multum sanguinis, multum sollicitudinis in ore* (5,17,3), and what

4 Further, vaguer comments on young men's good looks are *mira - - in ore ipso vultuque suavitas* (2,13,6) and *quanta probitas in ore* (9,9,2).

5 After praising Euphrates' impressive appearance (see below, pp.58f.), Pliny adds a similar excuse: *quae licet fortuita et inania putentur* (1,10,7). Too much attention paid to one's outward appearance clearly irritated him, one example being a certain Hostilius Firminus to whom he refers disparagingly as *hominis compti semper et pumicati* (2,11,23).

he means by this is evident from his adding that *magis in studiis homines timor quam fiducia decet*.⁶ Apart from these shades of meaning, we are left with perhaps the most natural explanation, that ruddiness was simply regarded as beautiful. It seems that the ancient attitude to a ruddy or tanned complexion, which had formerly been looked upon as ugly and unfashionable, began to change during the first century after Christ. There is more and more evidence of the importance attached to sunbaths, whether for health's or beauty's sake. Pliny's uncle, to take only one example on this occasion, used to take sunbaths regularly: *aestate, si quid otii, iacebat in sole* (3,5,10).⁷

Pliny's description of the imposing appearance of the philosopher Euphrates consists of the following four points: *proceritas corporis, decora facies, demissus capillus, ingens et cana barba* (1,10,7). Tall stature had been a characteristic of both male and female beauty in Homer and ever since, probably due to the fact that heroes and heroines were traditionally taller than ordinary people.⁸ The superhuman quality of tallness is specially underlined in Pliny's description of the female ghost, *mulieris figura*, who had appeared to Curtius Rufus, as *humana grandior pulchriorque* (7, 27,2). This superhuman trait suitably characterizes the Emperor Trajan, whose *proceritas corporis* is mentioned in the Panegyricus twice (4,7 and 22,2); in the latter of these passages he is even called *elatiior aliis et excelsior*. A more general admiration for size is expressed in Pliny's letter to Tacitus: *vides, ut statuas,*

6 In this light it is easy to see that Regulus' paleness, to which Pliny pays special attention, was a sign of his notorious insolence: *expalluit notabiliter, quamvis palleat semper* (1,5,13).

7 Cf. *usus - - sole* (6,16,5). Further particulars will be found in a paper which I am preparing on the ancient attitude to sunbaths. Pliny the Younger did not care for the sun - at any rate the letter dealing with his daily summer routine at his Tuscan villa (9,36) makes no mention of sunbaths.

8 See K. Jax, *Der Frauentypus der römischen Dichtung*, Innsbruck 1938, 25, and S. Lilja, *The Roman Elegists' Attitude to Women*, Helsinki 1965, 123-127.

signa, picturas, hominum denique multorumque animalium formas, arborum etiam, si modo sint decorae, nihil magis quam amplitudo commendat (1,20,5). Quadlbauer notes here a similarity with Longinus: ἐπὶ μὲν τέχνης θαυμάζεται τὸ ἀκριβέστατον, ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν φυσικῶν ἔργων τὸ μέγεθος (de subl. 36,3).⁹ Longinus thus distinguishes natural creatures from artefacts, in which exactness is more desirable than size.

Euphrates is further characterized, apart from his tall stature and beautiful lineaments (*decora facies*), by his long hair and large white beard: *demissus capillus, ingens et cana barba* (1,10,7). Stoic philosophers had been uncouth and austere of old, with long hair and beards, but by Pliny's time they had begun to pay more attention to outward appearance. It was exceptional, and for this very reason impressive, that Euphrates still wore his hair long, albeit well-groomed, as can be seen from Pliny's explicit remark *nullus horror in cultu*. On the other hand, there is nothing out of the ordinary in Euphrates' large white beard, since his teacher Musonius insisted on the full growth of the natural beard as the mark of a man.¹⁰ There were, of course, individual differences in the attitude to a long beard: Quintilian, for instance, disapproved of large beards (Inst. 12,3,12). Pliny, for his part, seems to have been particularly fascinated by hair in general. In his description of Trajan's good looks he dwells on the Emperor's *honor capitis prematurely whitened: nec sine quodam munere deum festinatis senectutis insignibus ad augendam maiestatem ornata caesaries* (Paneg. 4,7).

A couple of incidental comments in Pliny's letters throw some light upon the art of portrait-painting at that time. Pliny writes to Tacitus: *esse nobis curae solet, ut facies nostra ab optimo quoque artifice exprimatur* (7,33,2). It had been fashionable to sit for a picture from the beginning of the first century B.C. onwards,

⁹ F. Quadlbauer, WS 71 (1958) 108, n. 446.

¹⁰ The reappearance of the beard in Roman society under the influence of Hadrian thus seems to have derived from the school of Musonius: see Sherwin-White, op.cit. 109.

from the time when the late Hellenistic portrait style gradually began to impose realistic traits on the more or less impersonal *imagines* of older Roman tradition. The following remark shows that Pliny did not trust the skill of artists: *pictores pulchram absolutamque faciem raro nisi in peius effingunt* (5,15,1). A beautiful model, however, did not impress him personally, for he had bought a small statue of Corinthian bronze explicitly because it was *expressum*, characteristically expressive (3,6,1). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Pliny did not normally care much for Corinthian bronze.¹¹ His words *neque enim ullum adhuc Corinthium domi habeo* (3,6,4) sound complacently supercilious, and his mockingly modest remark *quantum ego sapio, qui fortasse in omni re, in hac certe perquam exiguum sapio* (3,6,1) is even more clearly directed against the great connoisseurs of his time, such as the Mamurra of Martial.¹² Spurinna, Pliny's great hero, did possess some Corinthian bronze, but the devoted admirer succeeded in finding an extenuating excuse: *quibus delectatur nec adficitur* (3,1,9).

Pliny's detailed description of the Corinthian statuette he had bought enumerates the realistic, even naturalistic, traits of the late Hellenistic portrait style: *effingit senem stantem; ossa, musculi, nervi, venae, rugae etiam ut spirantis apparent, rari et cedentes capilli, lata frons, contracta facies, exile collum, pendent lacerti, papillae iacent, recessit venter; a tergo quoque eadem aetas ut ante* (3,6,2). The major problem concerns the sex of the person represented. While Sherwin-White states that "the realistic 'old woman' was a favourite type in late Hellenistic sculpture", most others seem to be of the opinion that the statuette

¹¹ Moreover, the statuette he had now bought was to be presented to the temple of Jupiter at Comum.

¹² Mamurra *consuluit nares an olerent aera Corinthon* (Mart. Epigr. 9,59,11). Cf. Trimalchio's opinion on glassware as compared with Corinthian bronze: *certe non olunt* (Petron. Sat. 50). These passages are certainly meant to be humorous, but metal objects do in fact tend to acquire a strange odour: see S. Lilja, *The Treatment of Odours in the Poetry of Antiquity*, Helsinki 1972, 213.

in question represented an old man,¹³ and even one of the two sculptures referred to by Sherwin-White himself represents an old fisherman.¹⁴ The female sex finds some support in Pliny's remark about the *papillae*, a word not often used of a man's breast - but old men's breasts are apt to grow as the result of a change in the hormonal balance. Pliny's remark about the model's thinning hair, on the other hand, would be more appropriate to the male sex - although old women, too, often show signs of losing their hair.

Pliny's description of the Corinthian statuette as representing a *senex stans* brings together the model's characteristic traits in a realistic way to form a lively whole, as lively as the portrait itself (note his words *ut spirantis*). Guillemin rightly remarks that this passage testifies to the late Hellenistic influence upon Pliny in preferring the characteristic to the beautiful,¹⁵ but her other examples, Trajan and Julius Bassus, are perhaps not quite relevant in this connection. The very brevity of Pliny's description of Bassus' outward appearance renders it insignificant: *in procero corpore maesta et squalida senectus* (4,9,22). The style of the Panegyricus, on the other hand, is so elevated that it does not allow for very realistic details, with the exception perhaps of the Emperor's prematurely whitened hair: *iam firmitas, iam proceritas corporis, iam honor capitis et dignitas oris, ad hoc aetatis inflexa maturitas nec sine quodam munere deum festinatis senectutis insignibus ad augendam maiestatem ornata caesaries* (4,7).¹⁶ There

13 This view is shared, for example, by A.-M. Guillemin, *Pline et la vie littéraire de son temps*, Paris 1929, 153. The quotation is from Sherwin-White, *op.cit.* 226.

14 See H. Stuart Jones, *The Sculptures of the Palazzo dei Conservatori*, Oxford 1926, 144, n. 27, Plate 50.

15 Guillemin, *op.cit.* 153: "Pline semble avoir préféré le modèle caractérisé au modèle beau et a très bien réussi d'autres vieillards encore." See also A.W. Lawrence, *Later Greek Sculpture*, London 1927, 40-41.

16 The other passage in the Panegyricus (22,2) is concerned only with Trajan's tall stature: *sola corporis proceritate elatior aliis et excelsior.*

is, however, a better example of late Hellenistic realism in Pliny's letters, namely, his description of a phantom appearing in the shape of an old man: *senex macie et squalore confectus, promissa barba, horrenti capillo* (7,27,5).¹⁷

*

To sum up: there are very few descriptions of a person's outward appearance in Pliny's letters, at any rate when compared with those of natural scenery, both wild and cultivated. Pliny was least interested in describing female beauty, for he does this only once, when praising an old lady's youthful looks. There are some eulogies of male beauty, but most of them are quite short or, if longer, followed by an excuse of some sort. Characteristically expressive traits - preferably those of an old person, whether male or female - are the ones that attract Pliny most, and his descriptions of them are as realistic as the models themselves. This is quite in accordance with the general predilection found in the late Hellenistic portrait style, which had gradually become predominant in Rome since the beginning of the first century B.C.

It would certainly be worth comparing Pliny's attitude to the description of human appearance in general, together with his special interest in the characteristic and the expressive aspects of appearance, with corresponding descriptions in other authors of antiquity. This would, I feel, provide a stimulating and instructive area of research for any scholar interested in the subject.

¹⁷ Cf. Pliny's description of Euphrates' impressive appearance (above, pp. 58f.).