

Pliny the Younger and Christians: An Attempt at Evaluation

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Introductory Remarks



One of the most important sources for research on the history of the persecution of Christians during the period of the Roman Empire is a fragment of correspondence between the governor of Bithynia and Pontus Pliny the Younger and the Emperor Trajan.¹ The famous inquiry of the official concerning the guidelines on the procedure that should be adopted with regard to the people accused of professing their faith in Christ, as well as the laconic answer from the ruler, determined the way of handling the court procedure in such cases for decades to come.

It might have been influenced by the fact that Pliny's correspondence was published and enjoyed considerable popularity amongst the ancient readers.²

Despite the fact that there is extensive literature devoted to the circumstances of the trials of Bithynian Christians,³ it is worth devoting an analysis to Pliny's account and the Emperor's answer one more time. In as much as the legal aspect

¹ Still one of the best studies devoted to the nature of this correspondence remains: VIDMAN, Ladislav, *Étude sur la correspondance de Pline le Jeune avec Trajan*, Roma, 1972. Cf. also recent Polish work DEBIŃSKI, Antoni, JOŃCA, Maciej, LERACZYK, Izabela, ŁUKA, Agata (eds.), *Korespondencja Pliniusza Młodszego z cesarzem Trajanem*, vol. I–II, Lublin, 2017 (further literature there).

² For a sceptical view on the subject, see: CAMERON, Alan, *Fate of Pliny's Letters in the Late Empire*, in: *The Classical Quarterly*, N° 2/1965, Cambridge, pp. 289–298.

³ For the most detailed analysis of this text from the legal perspective so far, see: FREUDENBERGER, Rudolf, *Das Verhalten der römischen Behörden gegen die Christen im 2. Jahrhundert. Dargestellt am Brief des Plinius an Trajan und den Rescripten Trajans und Hadrians*, München, 1968. See also: JOHNSON, Gary John, *Roman Bithynia and Christianity to the Mid-Fourth Century*, Ann Arbor, 1984.

of their correspondence was highlighted on numerous occasions, the very assessment of the decisions taken by the two officials often eluded a deeper analysis. Yet, in accordance with the contemporary standards, the behaviour of the imperial governor might be described as a criminal contempt of court. Romans, naturally, did not know the concept. In the 2nd century AD, they were also not familiar with the idea of the judge's responsibility for the ethical and procedural carelessness which might cost somebody's life. Raised on the ideals of Greek philosophy, the representatives of the governing elite were keenly aware, however, that in each manifestation of their life they should aspire to virtue. Somebody who would send people to death without conducting a proper trial cannot be said to fulfil this ideal. Worse still, he insulted it. When the antique trial is analysed through the optics of the contemporary standards, there are, unfortunately, scarcely any positive words that can be used to describe Trajan's behaviour.

Christians

Pliny the Younger arrived in Bithynia and Pontus (today: the territory in the north of Turkey) as a special representative of the Emperor around the year 111 AD.⁴ As a governor, his main duties included bringing back peace to the region, as well as the control over the municipal finances and putting them in order. 'A good and serious governor should see to it that the province he rules remains pacified and quiet. He will achieve this without difficulty if he earnestly pursues evil men and clears them off his province,'⁵ a Severan jurist, Domitius Ulpian wrote. Therefore, in accordance with the reason of state, 'evil men' should be identified, then pacified or eliminated.

Hence, when the people accused of practising Christianity were brought before Pliny, he did not hesitate as to what action he should take. He had no doubts that they were 'evil people', posing a threat to the internal order of the province.⁶

⁴ WILCKEN, Ulrich, *Plinius Reisen in Bithynien und Pontus*, in: *Hermes*, 49/1914, Berlin, p. 125. For a detailed account of Pliny's mission, see: WINNICZUK, Lidia, *Pliniusz Młodszy w świetle swoich listów i mów*, Warszawa, 1987, pp. 369–440.

⁵ *Digesta* 1.18.13pr.: 'Congruit bono et gravi praesidi curare, ut pacata atque quieta provincia sit quam regit. Quod non difficile optinebit, si sollicite agat, ut malis hominibus provincia careat eosque conquirat.'

⁶ VITTINGHOFF, Friedrich, "Christianus sum": *Das "Verbrechen" von Außenseitern der römischen Gesellschaft*, in: *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, č. 3/1984, Stuttgart, pp. 345–346.

As it transpires from the above, a practice, criticised amongst others by Tertullian, of accusing Christians of causing all misfortunes and blaming them *in absentia* for all the troubles had a long tradition.⁷ Already in the year 64 AD, when Nero accused the followers of Christ of setting fire to Rome and then executed many of them in a cruel manner, very few survivors of the fire felt any sympathy towards them. In the words of Tacitus: ‘those therefore who confessed were first brought to trial, afterwards by the information derived from them, an immense multitude were joined with them, not so much for the crime of incendiarism, as for hatred of the human race.’⁸ The list of crimes allegedly perpetrated by the followers of Christ was a long one. They were accused of organising secret meetings, conspiring against the government, attempting to organise a military coup, magic, practising poisoning, incest, cannibalism, forging last wills, and numerous others.⁹

‘Procedure’

In the procedure initiated by Pliny in the case of Bithynian Christians, the governor’s appallingly schematic thinking is particularly striking, which he manifested before the people whose lives were placed in his hands. It is even difficult to assess the procedure he applied in judiciary categories.¹⁰ What is significant in his approach is undue haste and succinctness. Undoubtedly, such an approach must have been influenced by the large number of the accused. It is possible that the governor intended to devote at least a few moments to each of the accused. Yet, it is hard to view the effect of such a procedure as satisfactory:

⁷ TERTULLIAN, *Apologeticum* 40.1. See: STOCKTON, David, s.v. *Christianos ad leones*, in: LEVICK, Barbara (ed.), *The Ancient Historian and His Materials: Essays in Honour of C. E. Stevens on His Seventieth Birthday*, Gregg, 1975, pp. 199–212.

⁸ TACITUS, *Annales* 15.44: *primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud proinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt*. Further remarks on *institutum Neronianum* – BOURGERY, Abel, *Le problème de l’Institutum Neronianum*, in: *Latomus*, 2/1938, Bruxelles, pp. 106–111; BORLEFFS, Jan Willem Philip, *Institutum Neronianum*, in: *Vigiliae Christianae*, 6/1952, Leiden, pp. 129–145; ZEILLER, Jacques, *Institutum Neronianum. Loi fantôme ou réalité?* in: *Revue d’Histoire Ecclesiastique*, 50/1955, Louvain, pp. 393–399.

⁹ See: HENRICHS, Albert, *Pagan Ritual and the Alleged Crimes of the Early Christians. A Reconsideration*, in: GRANFIELD, Patrick, JUNGMANN, Josef A. (eds.), *Kyriakon. Festschrift J. Quasten*, vol. I, Münster, 1970, pp. 18–35.

¹⁰ SCHOLZ, Udo W., *Römische Behörden und Christen im 2. Jahrhundert*, in: *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte*, č. 2/1972, Leiden, p. 158.

In the preface of his text the official explains himself:

I was never present at examinations of Christians, therefore I do not know what is customarily punished, nor to what extent, nor how far to take the investigation. I was quite undecided; should there be any consideration given to age; are those who are however minors no different from the adults? Should penitence be taken into consideration; or, as it has been the case particularly with Christians, to desist makes no difference? Should the name itself be punished, even if crimes are absent, or only the crimes that go with the name?¹¹

Soon, however, he declares that he did not hesitate to resort to the measures which today might be described as ruthless:

Meanwhile, this is the method I have followed with those who were brought before me as Christians: I asked them directly if they were Christians. The ones who answered affirmatively I questioned again, and yet a third time, under the threat of death: those who persisted I ordered to be led away to be executed. I had thus no doubts that irrespective of what they confessed to, insolence and unrelenting obstinacy deserve a punishment. There were also others there obsessed with the same madness, whom I decided to be sent to the City, because they were Roman citizens.¹²

There are many indications which prove that by sending people to death after he had heard an affirmative answer to his question three times, Pliny acted in accordance with a commonly applied scheme.¹³ Only with time he enriched his course of the procedure by something vaguely reminiscent of the taking of evidence:¹⁴

¹¹ PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 96.1–2: Cognitionibus de Christianis interfui numquam: ideo nescio quid et quatenus aut puniri soleat aut quaeri. 2 Nec mediocriter haesitavi, sitne aliquod discrimen aetatum, an quamlibet teneri nihil a robustioribus differant; detur paenitentiae venia, an ei, qui omnino Christianus fuit, desisse non prosit; nomen ipsum, si flagitiis careat, an flagitia cohaerentia nomini puniantur.

¹² Ibidem, 2–4: Interim, <in> iis qui ad me tamquam Christiani deferebantur, hunc sum secutus modum. Interrogavi ipsos an essent Christiani. Confitentes iterum ac tertio interrogavi supplicium minatus; perseverantes duci iussi. Neque enim dubitabam, qualecumque esset quod faterentur, pertinaciam certe et inflexibilem obstinationem debere puniri. Fuerunt alii similis amentiae, quos, quia cives Romani erant, adnotavi in urbem remittendos.

¹³ It is worth noting some similarities in the procedure against the Bithynian Christians and the trial of Bishop Simeon of Jerusalem. EUSEBIUS, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.32. For further remarks, see: KERESZTES, Paul, *Rome and the Christian Church*, in: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. II, 23.1, Berlin–New York, 1979, p. 274.

¹⁴ More on the subject: JOŃCA, Maciej, *Środki dowodowe zastosowane w procesie chrześcijan pontyjskich w relacji Pliniusza Młodszego (Ep. 10. 96)*, in: *Zeszyty Prawnicze*, N° 2/2005, Warszawa, pp. 99–114.

Soon as it often happens, the circle of the suspects increased. I was delivered anonymous information, containing the names of numerous people accused of being the followers of Christ. I decided that those who denied that they were or ever had been Christians, when they swore before me, called on the gods and offered incense and wine to your image (which I had ordered to be brought in for this purpose, along with images of the gods), and also cursed Christ (which, it is said, it is impossible to force those who are real Christians to do) might be acquitted. Others named by an informer, initially said they had been Christians, but now denied it. They claimed, they had been, but had lapsed, some three years ago, some earlier; and some even over twenty years ago. These all worshipped both your image and the images of the gods and cursed Christ.¹⁵

Doubts

Only after identifying the third group – the apostates – out of the mass of the accused, Pliny decided to contact the Emperor.¹⁶ The logic of the Roman governor's thinking was simple. Those who denied their faith in Christ and proved it through a successful completion of 'tests', deserved to be free. Christians, who decided to adhere to their faith, deserved death as perpetrators of the most severe crimes. However, it was difficult to decide about the fate of the apostates, who, in fact, successfully passed the 'tests', but who, in accordance with the common belief, had committed acts punishable by law in the past. The governor wanted to find out whether such actions, as well as the very fact of being a Christian, can be time-barred.¹⁷

At this point, the reader of the letter becomes aware to his surprise that it was the problem of the apostates that forced Pliny to become interested in the real reasons for which he was sending people to death. Attempts to prove that the

¹⁵ PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 96.4–6: Mox ipso tractatu, ut fieri solet, diffundente se crimine plures species inciderunt. 5 Propositus est libellus sine auctore multorum nomina continens. Qui negabant esse se Christianos aut fuisse, cum praeunte me deos appellarent et imagini tuae, quam propter hoc iusseram cum simulacris numinum afferi, ture ac vino supplicarent, praeterea male dicerent Christo, quorum nihil cogi posse dicuntur qui sunt re vera Christiani, dimittendos putavi. 6 Alii ab indice nominati esse se Christianos dixerunt et mox negaverunt; fuisse quidem sed desisse, quidam ante triennium, quidam ante plures annos, non nemo etiam ante viginti. <Hi> quoque omnes et imaginem tuam deorumque simulacra venerati sunt et Christo male dixerunt.

¹⁶ VITTINGHOFF, *Christianus sum: Das "Verbrechen" von Außenseitern der römischen Gesellschaft*, p. 346.

¹⁷ SCHILLINGER-HÄFELE, Ute, *Plinius, ep. 10,96 und 97: Eine Frage und ihre Beantwortung*, in: *Chiron*, 9/1979, Berlin, p. 386.

Christians had been involved in some subversive anti-national activity of a political character did not work out. In a similar vein, the search for common crimes that the Christians might have potentially committed was of no avail. On the contrary, Pliny himself admits that:

They used to gather on a stated day before dawn and in their community worship Christ as a god, and they took an oath, but not to involve themselves in villainy, but rather to commit no theft, no fraud, no adultery; not to break faith, nor to deny money placed with them in trust. Once these things were done, it was their custom to part and return later to eat a meal together, innocently, although they stopped this after my edict, in which I, following your mandate, forbade all secret societies.¹⁸

The ending of the letter verges on the embarrassing:

All the more, I believed it was necessary to find out what the truth was from two servant maids, who were called deaconesses, by means of torture. Nothing more did I find than a disgusting, fanatical superstition. Therefore, I stopped the examination, and hastened to consult you. For it appears to be a proper matter for counsel, most greatly on account of the number of people endangered. For many of all ages, all classes, and both sexes are already facing prosecution, and many still shall be in future. And not only the cities; the contagion of this superstition is spread throughout the villages and the countryside; but it appears to be possible to stop it and put it right. One thing is certain: the temples which were once deserted are beginning to be filled again, and the long interrupted sacred rites are being revived, while food from the sacrifices is sold everywhere, for which up to now a buyer was hardly to be found. From which it may easily be concluded that a large mass of people can be led in the right direction if they are allowed to repent.¹⁹

¹⁸ PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 96.7: essent soliti stato die ante lucem convenire, carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem seque sacramento non in scelus aliquod obstringere, sed ne furta ne latrocinia ne adulteria committerent, ne fidem fallerent, ne depositum appellati abnegarent. Quibus peractis morem sibi discedendi fuisse rursusque coeundi ad capiendum cibum, promiscuum tamen et innoxium; quod ipsum facere desisse post edictum meum, quo secundum mandata tua hetaerias esse vetueram.

¹⁹ PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 96.8–10: Quo magis necessarium credidi ex duabus ancillis, quae ministrae dicebantur, quid esset veri, et per tormenta quaerere. Nihil aliud inveni quam superstitionem pravam et immodicam. Ideo dilata cognitione ad consulendum te decucurri. Visa est enim mihi res digna consultatione, maxime propter periclitantium numerum. Multi enim omnis aetatis, omnis ordinis, utriusque sexus etiam vocantur in periculum et vocabuntur. Neque civitates tantum, sed vicus etiam atque agros superstitionis istius contagio pervagata est; quae videtur sisti et corrigi posse. Certe satis constat prope iam desolata templa coepisse celebrari, et sacra sollemnia diu intermissa repeti passimque venire <carnem> victimarum, cuius adhuc rarissimus emptor inveniebatur. Ex quo facile est opinari, quae turba hominum emendari possit, si sit paenitentiae locus.

Bizarre Answer

Most certainly, Pliny must be given due credit for providing the Emperor with a considerably detailed account of all the actions he had undertaken. He neither regrets nor attempts to hide anything. The mention of ordering massive arrests on the grounds of information from an anonymous informer may serve as a stark example of that.

It might also come as a considerable astonishment when we consider the speed with which people were sent to death on the mere accusation of the faith in Christ, even if we take into account the common persistence of stereotypes in connection with the new religion.²⁰ While analysing some other letters from Pliny to Trajan, one can find, e.g. a story of a man who illegally evaded being compelled to work in the mines,²¹ a runaway slave impersonating someone else²² or the two slaves who intended to enlist in the legions.²³ In none of the above cases did Pliny feel it necessary to inform the Emperor that he had just taken somebody's life. He matter-of-factly describes the case and awaits an answer. Oddly enough, in the case of the Christians, he first ordered the executions and then became wondering whether he had any grounds to do so, only to decide to seek counsel with the Emperor.

The content of the imperial response issued in Trajan's name comes as no less of a surprise. It reads:

You have done the right thing in handling the cases of those who were brought to you under the charge of being Christians. There is no one standard rule of behaviour for such cases. These people must not be searched out, but if they are brought before your court and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished. However, if anyone denies that he is a Christian and proves it by offering sacrifice to our gods, he should be granted forgiveness despite the burden of the prior accusation. However, the information provided by anonymous informants cannot have any place in the court proceedings. This is an example of the worst practice, entirely not in keeping with our times.²⁴

²⁰ 'When time was running out, as D. Liebs explains, due to the threat of rebellion, the Emperor's permission was not necessary' (LIEBS, Detlef, *Das ius gladii der römischen Provinzgouverneure in der Kaiserzeit*, in: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 43/1981, Bonn, p. 223). However, were Christians planning to stir unrest or could such occur because of their instigation?

²¹ PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 58–60.

²² PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 74.

²³ PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 10.30. Further notes: ŁUĆ, Ireneusz, *Boni et mali milites Romani. Relacje między żołnierzami wojsk rzymskich w okresie wczesnego cesarstwa*, Kraków, 2010, pp. 37–52.

²⁴ PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 97.1–2: Actum quem debuisti, mi Secunde, in excutiendis causis eorum, qui Christiani ad te delati fuerant, secutus es. Neque enim in universum aliquid, quod quasi certam formam habeat, constitui potest. Conquirendi non sunt; si deferantur et arguantur, puniendi sunt, ita

The line which forbids initiating procedure against Christians on the basis of anonymous letters might sound very noble when taken out of the context. Indeed, Trajan became famous as a ruler who attempted to curb the practice of denunciatory activity in Rome. In literature, one can find opinions that he ‘eliminated the feeling of threat resulting from Domitian’s reliance on the services of *delatores*, anonymous, paid informers, whose accusations, usually unsigned and unsubstantiated, resulted in bringing charges of treason against anybody who opposed the Emperor.’²⁵ It was none other than Trajan who replied in a rescript to a rather unknown Adsiduus Severus that ‘it is better that one guilty of crime be unpunished than that an innocent person be condemned.’²⁶ A trace of Trajan’s aversion towards informers can be clearly observed in the letter addressed to Pliny. However, it is hard not to notice the discord resonating from the juxtaposition of the condemnation of the actions of the *delatores*, placed right after the Emperor’s praise of the measures taken by the governor.²⁷ After all, the Emperor knew that Pliny conducted arrests and executed people on the grounds of anonymous information. He also learnt from the account of his governor that the accused did not deserve such a cruel fate.

Attempt at Evaluation

In the literature on the subject, it is emphasised that the judiciary power of the governor was almost unlimited.²⁸ Enjoying the sympathy and trust of the Emperor, Pliny could without fear decide on the life and death of the inhabitants of the province who did not have Roman citizenship. However, the approach consisting of a mindless sentencing people to death did not fit the ethos of those who believed themselves to be educated and cultured. In the mission bestowed upon him, Pliny was supposed to be a representative and a reflection of the Emperor to the people in his province. Sentencing to death those who he knew nothing about could have

tamen ut, qui negaverit se Christianum esse idque re ipsa manifestum fecerit, id est supplicando dis nostris, quamvis suspectus in praeteritum, veniam ex paenitentia impetret. Sine auctore vero propositi libelli <in> nullo crimine locum habere debent. Nam et pessimi exempli nec nostri saeculi est.

²⁵ BENNETT, Julian, *Trajan. Optimus princeps. Życie i czasy*, Oświęcim, 2015, p. 208.

²⁶ Digesta 48.19.5: satius enim esse impunitum relinqui facinus nocentis quam innocentem damnari.

²⁷ Cf. FREUDENBERGER, *Das Verhalten der römischen Behörden gegen die Christen im 2. Jahrhundert*, p. 117.

²⁸ LIEBS, *Das ius gladii der römischen Provinzgouverneure in der Kaiserzeit*, p. 217–223.

been in line with the local customary procedure, but this is not to say that he behaved in a fair way.

In his essay *On Clemency* Seneca the Younger advised that a judge should always favour the innocent.²⁹ He taught that performing the duties of a judge is neither good nor bad in itself. Only the judgement adds a moral dimension to the function of a judge.³⁰ The biggest threat to the fairness of the judge is anger. According to Seneca, the duty of a good judge was to pass judgements, but without particular persistence.³¹ The governor of Bithynia and Pontus must have been aware of this and other canons of the stoic philosophy. Yet, there is no way of verifying how he would explain the sentence: ‘I had thus no doubts that irrespective of what else they confessed to, insolence and unrelenting obstinacy deserve a punishment.’³²

It seems that Pliny must have been aware that the way he behaved towards the Christians in Bithynia, from the ethical perspective, was not a source of pride, even though it did not entail any problems of a ‘disciplinary responsibility’. The belatedly revealed doubts with regard to the age of the accused, the length of their Christian practice or the economic miracle, which was to revitalise the businesses relating to pagan rites, are nothing else than mere coquetry and an attempt to divert attention. A form of self-justification can also be seen in the mention of the said insolence of the accused, which requires to be punished in all circumstances. It is hard to resist the impression that before the apostates appeared in front of Pliny, the Roman court was involved in a macabre selection. The survivors included only those who passed the ‘tests’ and (temporarily) Roman citizens. The others were executed without

²⁹ SENECA, *De Clementia* 1.20.2.

³⁰ SENECA, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* 118.11.

³¹ SENECA, *De Ira* 1.16.6.

³² PLINIUS, *Epistulae* 96.3. On the basis of this fragment a theory was created to the effect that the Bithynian Christians were in fact convicted of the insubordination towards the imperial official; see: SHERWIN-WHITE, Adrian Nicholas, *The Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again*, in: *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 3/1952, Oxford, pp. 210–213. This thesis met with quite widespread criticism. See, for instance: DE SAINTE CROIX, Geoffrey Ernest Maurice, *Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?*, in: *Past and Present*, 26/1963, Oxford, p. 18. Sherwin-White may be right as to one thing: the alleged insolence of the Christians constitutes the only rational proof which, ‘on paper,’ allows for a justification for passing so many death sentences on people who had not broken the law. See: SHERWIN-WHITE, Adrian Nicholas, *Why Were Christians Persecuted? An Amendment*, in: *Past and Present*, 27/1964, Oxford, pp. 25–27. On the other hand, it sounds entirely unconvincing that Pliny was anxious about the blasphemous behaviour of the Christians and sentenced them to death in order to appease the moods amongst the local community. This is claimed by BENNETT, *Trajan. Optimus princeps*, p. 215.

exception. At that time, nobody gave any consideration to the young age, sex or the type of crime that the Christians might have been charged with.

The decision of the Emperor must have come as a disappointment. Pliny ‘performed his duty’ probably because his actions were automatic. In a bureaucratic and mindless way, he emulated those who had already had the experience of passing judgements in cases involving Christians. Trajan was in a different situation. It was probably the first time that a Roman Emperor received a coherent, moderately objective and entirely believable account of who Christians really were. It was even more valuable in the sense that it did not pertain to representatives of the Roman aristocracy, who might be partial to lobbying with the Emperor on behalf of the co-believers. It described the people who, due to an unfortunate coincidence, became confronted with the Roman repression apparatus.

Pliny’s account subverted all the accusations relating to the alleged criminal character of the Christian religion.³³ Secondly, which was noted with surprise by the governor, it turned out that Christian communities proclaim values which are desirable from the perspective of the social policy of the state.³⁴ Trajan had a unique opportunity to bring a true change to the lives of Christians, at least in Bithynia. He failed to do that. His answer to Pliny’s letter was of fundamental importance only to the people who were ready to deny their faith – for the apostates.³⁵

The decision of the Emperor, sanctioning Pliny’s mindless and criminal actions, caused that the inhabitants of the empire who professed themselves to be followers of Christ were forced to live in the feeling of constant threat. It did not change until the year 311 AD, in which the Emperor Galerius issued the toleration edict.³⁶ Even though already during the reign of the Emperor Decius, the character of the Christian religion became commonly known and nobody accused the followers of Christ of committing grave crimes and wicked life, it was not until

³³ See, for instance: BAUMGARTNER, Ephrem, *Cibum capere promiscuum tamen et innoxium* (*Plin. ep. 96*), in: *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, č. 2/1909, Innsbruck, pp. 50–66; STAF-FLER, Johann B., *Das Problem der altchristlichen Agape und der Pliniusbrief an der Kaiser Trajan*, in: *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, Nu. 3/1909, Innsbruck, pp. 609–613.

³⁴ See: MERKELBACH, Reinhold, *Der Eid der Bithynischen Christen*, in: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 43/1981, Bonn, pp. 73–74.

³⁵ VITTINGHOFF, “*Christianus sum*”: *Das “Verbrechen” von Außenseitern der römischen Gesellschaft*, p. 348.

³⁶ Cf.: VEYNE, Paul, *Początki chrześcijańskiego świata (312–394)*, Warszawa, 2009, pp. 21–22.

the 4th century AD that the Roman tribunals stopped reiterating the unfortunate model of asking questions about professing Christianity and of conducting absurd ‘tests’. Providing an affirmative answer, accompanied by the lack of willingness to make a sacrifice for the Emperor or take an oath to his genius equalled a death sentence for the accused.³⁷

Summary

The famous letter of Pliny the Younger concerning Bithynian Christians was widely commented by the lawyers, historians, theologians etc. Many generations of researchers tried to justify the conduct of Pliny and the later reaction of Trajan to it. From the legal point of view everything seemed to be fine. As a Roman governor Pliny was obliged to take any steps to retain the public order in his province. Yet, no one dared to ask whether he had to appeal to such drastic methods. It seems that he had not to. His conduct in relation to the Bithynian Christians destroys prevalent image of Pliny as a well-educated humanist and sensitive aesthete. The whole story puts in quite bad light also his superior – the emperor Trajan.

Resumé

Slavný dopis Plinia mladšího týkající se bithýnských křesťanů byl zevrubně komentován právníky, historiky, teology atd. Mnoho generací vědců se pokusilo ospravedlnit Pliniovo chování a pozdější Trajanovu reakci. Z právníckého hlediska se vše zdálo v pořádku. Jako římský vládce byl Plinius povinen učinit všechny kroky k udržení veřejného pořádku ve své provincii. Přesto se nikdo neodvážil zeptat, zda se musel uchýlit k tak drastickým metodám. Zdá se, že nikoli. Jeho chování ve vztahu k bithýnským křesťanům boří převládající obraz Plinia jako velmi vzdělaného humanisty a citlivého estéta. Celý příběh staví do špatného světla i jeho nadřízeného – císaře Trajana.

Keywords: Pliny the Younger, Christians, Bithynia, Roman law, ethics

Klíčová slova: Plinius mladší, křesťané, Bithýnie, římské právo, etika

³⁷ See: TERTULLIANUS, *Apologeticum* 2.8. Cf.: CURETON, William, WRIGHT, William, *Ancient Syriac Documents Relative to the Earliest Establishment of christianity in Edessa and the neighbouring countries: from the year after our Lord's Ascension to the beginning of the fourth century*, London–Edinburgh, 1864, p. 46; FREUDENBERGER, *Das Verhalten der römischen Behörden gegen die Christen im 2. Jahrhundert*, p. 127, 138; VITTINGHOFF, “*Christianus sum*”: *Das “Verbrechen” von Außenseitern der römischen Gesellschaft*, p. 350.

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