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Networking in the Early Roman Empire: Pliny the Younger

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Abstract

Living during the heyday of the Roman Empire, the senator Pliny the Younger (ca. AD 61/62 – 113/114) was in contact with the social and political elite of his time: several Emperors, fellow senators like Cornelius Tacitus, Sosius Senecio, and Arulenus Rusticus, as well as other well-known figures of his time such as Suetonius Tranquillus and Valerius Martialis were part of Pliny's social network in Rome and his native Transpadana. Letters were a main means of staying in contact. Considering the multi-faceted ties of *amicitia*, ranging from family ties to friendship and patronage, this chapter endeavors to analyze the *Epistulae* of Pliny, trying to reconstruct cases where Pliny and/or his associates use their own political and social weight to build political alliances in order to procure positions for themselves and their *amici*. Social network analysis helps to identify clients, brokers, and patrons not only in each particular situation but in Pliny's network as a whole, showing who helped whom and the reasons and means how they did it.

1 Introduction: The Network of the younger Pliny*

While historians have for a long time concentrated on powerful individuals such as emperors, kings, and influential statesmen, the people and groups that surrounded them have also proven to be a worthwhile subject to research society as a whole. This approach is not easy in contemporary times, and becomes even harder as we travel back through the ages, where our sources become scarce due to a lack of literacy and/or works having survived the centuries. We must therefore appreciate and carefully study any work handed down to us that gives us an insight into everyday networks and helps us to evaluate their scientific value. In this sense, Pliny the Younger's *Epistulae* provides us with exactly what we need.

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, or Pliny the Younger, as he is commonly known, was born in 61/62 AD to the equestrians Lucius Caecilius Cilo and Plinia Marcella in Comum, Northern Italy. Adopted by his mother's brother Gaius Plinius Secundus after his father's early death, the younger Pliny studied to become a lawyer. He entered politics in his early 20s, backed by several influential senators from Comum, among them Lucius Verginius Rufus and Quintus Corellius Rufus. These revered men acted as mentors and helped Pliny to establish vital contacts in the upper classes of Rome, and even with emperor Domitian himself. He favoured Pliny on several occasions and made him a senator around 91/92.¹

Being one of the emperor's favourites, Pliny soon became part of the upper echelons of Roman society. He was close friends with important people of the time, among them the historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus and emperor Traian's right-hand man, Lucius Licinius Sura. He also maintained ties with several elderly important men, such as the former consuls and proconsuls Quintus Verginius Rufus and Sextus Iulius Frontinus, as well as some who would rise to prominence later on, among them the biographer Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, along with Gnaeus Pedanius Fuscus Salinator, who would marry into the imperial family. Being this well-connected, it is not surprising that Pliny had an extensive literary correspondence, handed down to us in ten books. Nine of these contain more or less private letters, and were most likely published by Pliny himself. The tenth book consists of letters to and from emperor Traian, and was most likely published after Pliny's death. In total, the ten books consist of

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1 Pliny passed most of his career during the time of Domitian, from being *Decemvir stlitibus iudicandis* around AD 80 all the way to the post of *Praefectus aerarii militaris* when Domitian was killed in 96. See *CIL* V 5262 for a detailed *cursus honorum*.

369 letters, ranging from rather trivial matters through to descriptions of lawsuits, senatorial meetings, and recommendations, which are addressed to, or at least mention, more than 200 individuals. The *Epistulae* therefore offers an excellent and extensive insight into Pliny's network, which had at its centre the crème de la crème of the late first and early second century Roman society. Only by using the tools of modern network analysis can this web be made visible and comprehensible. As this network is of gigantic proportions, it must be subdivided into smaller network zones and clusters, such as literary circles, families, and people connected by lawsuits. Still, these zones and clusters intersect at certain points, the most obvious being Pliny himself, but also at persons such as Publius Cornelius Tacitus or the poet Marcus Valerius Martialis.

This paper aims to analyse three instances where this network appears very prominently. The first example I will consider is rather straightforward: Pliny's friend and patron Lucius Iulius Servianus agreed to marry his daughter Iulia Paulina to one of Pliny's protégés, Gnaeus Pedanius Fuscus Salinator. Being friends with both men, Pliny could not help but voice how happy he was about the agreed marriage, as is shown within letter 6.26. I will look at how the author got to know both L. Iulius Servianus and Cn. Fuscus Salinator, and what form his relationship took with each of them; I will then discuss the prospects for how the young Cn. Fuscus Salinator could make the best of having married into the family of L. Iulius Servianus, who happened to be related to Publius Aelius Hadrianus, who would a couple of years later rule the Roman Empire.

My second case study concerns Pliny's defence of Corellia Hispulla, the daughter of Quintus Corellius Rufus, a lifelong friend of Pliny's family, against the designated consul Gaius Caecilius Strabo in court. Pliny faced a dilemma, as he wished to help his friend's daughter, but at the same time was reluctant to plead against a fellow senator, especially a soon-to-be consul. Letter 4.17 offers a great insight into how Pliny finally came to the conclusion that he owed Q. Corellius Rufus (who had already died at that time) so much that he decided to take the side of Corellia Hispulla.

The final example to be examined here couldn't be more complex, as it involves several generations, strands of time, and events, which are all interwoven into a confusing web of allegiances and rivalries. The reader will learn of the philosophical opponents to the emperors Nero and Domitian, and the kind of fates they met. We will also meet Pliny's personal enemy, Marcus Aquilius Regulus, an imperial informant since the 60s and an important cog in the wheels of both Nero's and Domitian's alleged terror.

To get a better grasp of the persons involved and their relation to each other in the respective zones of Pliny's network, the three examples are displayed

graphically,² thus showing how Pliny and other individuals acted as intersections between the clusters inside each zone.

2 A Suitable Candidate

The first example of how Pliny's network functioned is a rather simple one: in *Ep.* 6.26 we learn that Lucius Iulius Servianus had recently promised his daughter Iulia Paulina to Gnaeus Pedanius Fuscus Salinator some time after AD 100. While this seems to be nothing out of the ordinary in itself, it is still interesting to take a closer look at both L. Iulius Servianus and Cn. Fuscus Salinator.

Lucius Iulius Servianus had been *consul suffectus* in A.D. 90 under Domitian. He took part in Traian's first Dacian campaign, where he distinguished himself.³ He became an important pillar in Traian's reign, for which Traian appointed him *consul ordinarius* in 102. This honour was to be repeated more than three decades later in 134 under Traian's successor, Hadrian.⁴ A considerable part of this honour may have been due to the fact that L. Iulius Servianus happened to be married to Domitia Paulina Minor, sister of Publius Aelius Hadrianus, making Servianus brother-in-law to the future emperor. L. Iulius Servianus obviously had strong connections to the rulers of the Roman Empire at this time, making him the perfect go-to-person whenever someone needed a favour that only the *princeps* could bestow. Thus L. Iulius Servianus used his influence to attain the *ius trium liberorum* for Pliny shortly after Traian's ascension to the throne in 98,⁵ granting the childless Pliny a considerable tax reduction originally intended to help Romans with three or more children.⁶

Pliny doesn't tell his readers how he and the 15 years senior L. Iulius Servianus got to know each other, but it is likely that one of Pliny's Mentors, Lucius Verginius Rufus, who was three times consul and highly respected,⁷ introduced the young Pliny to L. Iulius Servianus when Pliny entered politics in the early 80s.⁸ Despite the slight age difference, the friendship between Pliny and his patron-friend was a very close one; so close, indeed, that Pliny was seriously concerned when he didn't hear from his *amicus* – who was at the time

2 All graphs were drawn up using the open source software *VennMaker* 2.0 (<http://www.vennmaker.com>, accessed February 8, 2017), a tool specifically designed to investigate and visualise ego networks.

3 SYME (1957), p. 131.

4 ECK: *DNP*, Vol. 6, col. 43, s.v. Iulius.

5 PLIN. *Ep.* 10.2.

6 SEELENTAG (2004), p. 97.

7 PLIN. *Ep.* 2.1.2; ECK: *DNP*, Vol. 12, col. 63-64, s.v. Verginius.

8 PLIN. *Ep.* 2.1.8.

taking part in Traian's first Dacian campaign of 98 – for a while. Pliny therefore sent L. Iulius Servianus a letter, urging his friend to send him some sign of life to soothe Pliny's worst fears that something might have happened to his dearest friend (“caput amicissimus”).⁹

A few years later, Pliny learned that L. Iulius Servianus had recently agreed to marry his daughter Iulia Serviana Paulina to Gnaeus Pedanius Fuscus Salinator, yet another close friend of Pliny and one of his admirers. Cn. Fuscus Salinator's grandfather¹⁰ and father¹¹ of the same name had been suffect consuls in 61 and 84, respectively; he himself was a rhetor and lawyer, like Pliny, which is likely where the two men crossed paths.¹² We don't know how L. Iulius Servianus and Cn. Fuscus Salinator met, however. Pliny may have played a role in this, as he was friends with both and thus could have acted as a point of intersection, bringing together two formerly separate network clusters.

The younger Pliny himself tried to imitate his idol Marcus Tullius Cicero in terms of rhetorical style and was obviously successful in doing so, as he was a renowned orator and sought-after lawyer. It thus seems logical that Cn. Fuscus Salinator would choose Pliny as a role model to follow, both in rhetoric and life itself, as Pliny proudly writes to a friend named Maximus: he describes Cn. Fuscus Salinator as an excellent rhetor, showing uprightness (“probitas”) and perseverance (“constantia”),¹³ virtues that Pliny held in very high esteem, as I have stated elsewhere.¹⁴ In spite of their seemingly close relationship, there are only two surviving letters to Cn. Fuscus Salinator, appearing exclusively in book nine, and thus rather late in the collection as a whole. This fact raises the question of whether or not Cn. Fuscus Salinator truly was that important to Pliny. As a point of comparison, there are nine letters addressed to Publius Cornelius Tacitus, and even more that mention him, making him almost ubiquitous in the collection and revealing the importance of the fellow senator and friend to Pliny.¹⁵

The relative absence of letters to Cn. Fuscus Salinator may be due to the fact that Pliny personally chose which letters to publish and which to leave out; he likely deemed other letters too trivial for publication. However, the two letters we do have clearly demonstrate their respective roles as mentor and mentee: Pliny answers Cn. Fuscus Salinator's questions as to how he spends his days in

9 PLIN. *Ep.* 3.17.

10 *PIR*² P 201.

11 *PIR*² P 199.

12 *PIR*² P 200.

13 PLIN. *Ep.* 6.11.1.

14 GERMERODT (2015), p. 72-78.

15 GIBSON/MORELLO (2012), p. 142.

his *villae* during summer and winter, indicating that the mentee even strove to imitate Pliny's lifestyle.¹⁶

Yet the relationship between Pliny and Cn. Fuscus Salinator is far more than that of mentor and protégé; when Pliny learns that L. Iulius Servianus is about to marry his daughter to the young man, he congratulates the future father-in-law and proceeds to describe the husband-to-be: he states that he is of patrician origin and has renowned and well-respected parents, is interested in literature and the sciences, upright, polite, and dignified.¹⁷ Describing a person in terms like these reads somewhat like a letter of recommendation, as with those usually used in politics to attain esteemed positions for friends.¹⁸ Some sort of recommendation would be plausible had Pliny proposed Cn. Fuscus Salinator as a suitable candidate for the daughter of L. Iulius Servianus, but the letter was written *after* the marriage had already been agreed upon.¹⁹ Pliny may thus have been attempting to confirm the choice by testifying to the good character of Cn. Fuscus Salinator. Obviously, the author wouldn't have run down the young husband now that the wedding was being planned. But to give his own description of Cn. Fuscus Salinator more weight, Pliny adds that he is not at all blinded by his devotion to his young friend whom he loves dearly, but knows him intimately and is therefore genuinely convinced that Iulius Servianus has made the right choice:

*Neque enim amore decipior. Amo quidem effuse - ita officiis ita reuerentia meruit -, iudico tamen, et quidem tanto acrius quanto magis amo; tibi que ut qui explorauerim spondeo, habiturum te generum quo melior fingi ne uoto quidem potuit.*²⁰

I am not being blinded by love: Indeed, I love him very much – through kindness, through reverence he has deserved it - yet I judge, and indeed even sharper, the more I love him; and I, who know him intimately, assure you that you will have a good son-in-law and you cannot have wished for a better.²¹

Adding to the picture of intimate friendship between Pliny, L. Iulius Servianus and Cn. Fuscus Salinator is the third and final paragraph of the letter: Pliny, who

16 PLIN. *Ep.* 9.36, 9.40.

17 PLIN. *Ep.* 6.26.1: *Domus patricia, pater honestissimus, mater pari laude; ipse studiosus litteratus etiam disertus, puer simplicitate comitate iuuenis senex gravitate.*

18 For a general introduction to the letters of commendation see KADUSHIN (2012), p. 141. For the Roman practice see SPIELVOGEL (1993), pp. 14-16, and GERMERODT (2015) for Pliny's letters of recommendation in particular.

19 On how to find a candidate for marriage see TREGGIARI (1991).

20 PLIN. *Ep.* 6.26.1-2.

21 All translations are my own.

never had any children of his own, wishes that the young couple might bring forth children as soon as possible, albeit for some egoistical reasons:

*Superest ut auum te quam maturissime similiū sui faciat. Quam felix tempus illud, quo mihi liberos illius nepotes tuos, ut meos uel liberos uel nepotes, ex uestro sinu sumere et quasi pari iure tenere continget!*²²

It remains to be hoped that he will soon make you the grandfather of grandchildren similar to him. What a happy time it will be when I will be able to take his children, your grandchildren, from your lap and hold them with the same right as if they were my own children and grandchildren!

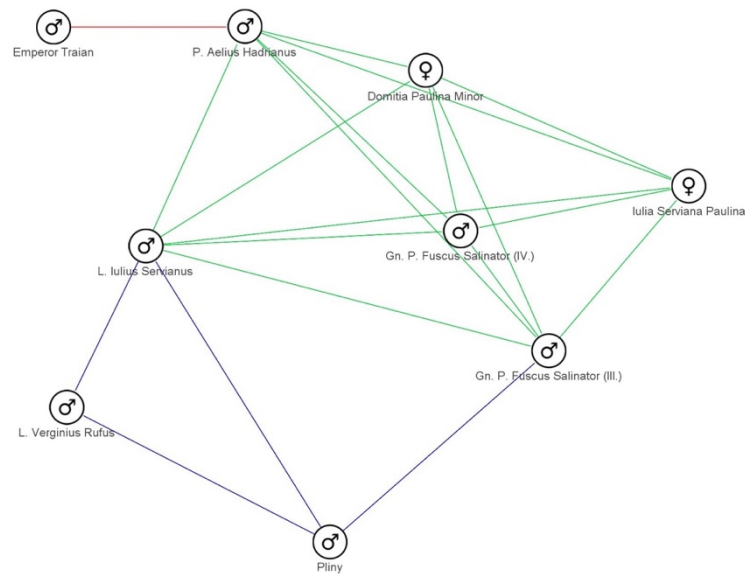
The author feels not just like a friend, but a part of the family, going so far as to treat the future children as if they were his own. The ties grew even stronger as two of his closest friends became parts of the same network cluster.

Cn. Fuscus Salinator obviously made the best of this new connection: being married to the future emperor's niece, he would become ordinary consul in 118 alongside Hadrian. According to the *Historia Augusta*, he subsequently cherished the hope of becoming Hadrian's successor, but didn't live long enough to see this day come.²³ Pliny's hopes of playing with Cn. Fuscus Salinator's children turned out to be in vain: around the year 113 Iulia Serviana Paulina bore a child, yet another Cn. Pedanius Fuscus Salinator, but by that time Pliny was either in Pontus-Bithynia in a proconsular capacity (110-113/114), or had already died. The boy would later follow in his father's footsteps: being the emperor's closest male relative, he was also expected to strive for the imperial purple. Young Cn. Fuscus Salinator and his grandfather L. Iulius Servianus were executed in 136 on charges of conspiring to assassinate Hadrian's designated successor and adopted son Lucius Aelius Caesar in order to make Cn. Fuscus Salinator emperor instead.²⁴

22 PLIN. *Ep.* 6.26.3.

23 SHA, *Hadr.* 23.2.

24 PIR² P 198; PIR¹ J 417.

Fig. 1²⁵

3 Pliny's Dilemma

Another letter that offers an insight into the network of the younger Pliny is *Ep.* 4.17 brings together several people within a lawsuit, as well as through friendship that spans generations. The letter itself is Pliny's reply to a request by one Clusinius Gallus, a person otherwise unknown to us, as is his relation to the people mentioned in the letter. Clusinius Gallus asked Pliny to plead for Corellia Hispulla in a case against the designated consul, Gaius Caecilius Strabo.²⁶ Pliny doesn't mention why C. Caecilius Strabo dragged the woman before the courts, mostly because his letter is an answer to a request, thereby making it unnecessary to repeat what Clusinius Gallus wrote (it would have helped the modern reader, though).

²⁵ Family relationships are shown in green, *amicitia* relationships in blue and adoptions in red.

²⁶ PLIN. *Ep.* 4.17.1.

Pliny thanks his friend for bringing the matter to his attention as he obviously hadn't heard of it before, but at the same time he is almost angry at Clusinius Gallus for asking him to accept the job as it would be unseemly (*turpissimum*) for him not to accept it.²⁷ The cause for Pliny accepting the case lies less in the lawsuit itself and the defendant Corellia Hispulla, but rather in her relations: the woman was the daughter of Quintus Corellius Rufus, friend and mentor to Pliny. Like Pliny, Q. Corellius Rufus and his family hailed from Comum; his sister was a close friend of Pliny's mother Plinia Marcella, which is how the two men met when Pliny was still a child.²⁸

Q. Corellius Rufus had been suffect consul around 78; after his death by suicide, mentioned by Pliny in *Ep.* 1.12, he is described as an enemy of emperor Domitian:

*Veni ad eum Domitiani temporibus in suburbano iacentem. Serui e cubiculo recesserunt - habebat hoc moris, quotiens intrasset fidelior amicus -; quin etiam uxor quamquam omnis secreti capacissima digrediebatur. Circumtulit oculos et 'Cur' inquit 'me putas hos tantos dolores tam diu sustinere?' - ut scilicet isti latroni uel uno die supersim.' Dedisses huic animo par corpus, fecisset quod optabat.*²⁹

I visited him in the time of Domitian when he lay sick in his suburban house. The slaves withdrew from the chamber – as was custom when trusty friends entered – even his wife, who was introduced into all secrets, made some room. His eyes wandered and he asked me “Why do you think I keep bearing all this pain? – Obviously so that I outlive that dog for at least one day.” Had he been given a body to match his spirit, he would have achieved what he wished for.

In *Ep.* 4.17, on the other hand, Pliny also makes clear that Q. Corellius Rufus used his political connections to commend his young friend on more than one occasion:

*Ille meus in petendis honouribus suffragator et testis, ille in incohendis deductor et comes, ille in gerendis consiliator et rector, ille denique in omnibus officiis nostris [...]. Quantum ille famae meae domi in publico, quantum etiam apud principem astruxit!*³⁰

When I applied for an office he was my endorser and witness, he was my teacher and companion in the beginning, he was my advisor and guide while exercising

27 PLIN. *Ep.* 4.17.1: *Admoneri enim debeo ut sciam, rogari non debeo ut faciam, quod mihi non facere turpissimum est.*

28 PLIN. *Ep.* 7.11.3; SHELTON (2013), p. 197.

29 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.12.6-8.

30 PLIN. *Ep.* 4.17.6.

my duties, lastly, in all my offices [...] How much has he done for my reputation at home and in the state, how much even with the princeps!

From this statement, it is clear that Q. Corellius Rufus carried some weight with the emperor and used it to help his protégé Pliny in his early career.³¹ Although Pliny refers to Nerva in his letter 4.17, he held most of his posts during the time of Domitian (and none during Nerva's reign), making it almost certain that the *princeps* to whom Q. Corellius Rufus had good connections was Domitian, rather than Nerva. The idea of his mentor being opposed to the now hated emperor might thus have been a retroactive construction to suit the current *Zeitgeist* under a new *princeps*.³²

Pliny, thankful to his deceased mentor and wishing to repay some of the debt to him, considered it an obligation to help Corellia Hispulla, as he states at the beginning of the letter: *An ego tueri Corelli filiam dubitem?*³³ This attitude is reinforced again near the end:

*Quod cum recordor, intellego mihi laborandum, ne qua parte uidear hanc de me fiduciam prouidentissimi uiri destituisse. Quare ego uero Corelliae adero promptissime nec subire offensas recusabo [...].*³⁴

As I recall this, I realise that I have to act so that it doesn't seem as if I had in part let down the trust this foresighted man put in me. Hence I will help Corellia immediately and not shy away from any enmities [...].

It seems somewhat strange that the description of Q. Corellius Rufus makes up about half of the entire letter to Clusinius Gallus (§§ 4-10) when the deceased himself is not the person for whom Pliny was supposed to plead for in court. Pliny goes so far as to end the epistle by stating his intention to elaborate on his relations to Q. Corellius Rufus even further in court to underline his reasons for defending his friend's daughter.³⁵

It gets even stranger still, since the actual defendant, Corellia Hispulla, isn't mentioned at all, besides the fact that she is the daughter of Q. Corellius Rufus. Although Pliny clearly states that he sees himself as a friend to Corellia

31 McDermott (1971), p. 86-87; Germerodt (2015), p. 81-82.

32 Germerodt (2015), p. 82-84.

33 Plin. Ep. 4.17.2.

34 Plin. Ep. 4.17.10-11.

35 Plin. Ep. 4.17.11.

Hispulla,³⁶ it is obvious from the composition of the letter that his assistance to her is less for the sake of herself than for her dead father.³⁷

The only thing that causes Pliny hesitate for a moment is the plaintiff he would have to face in court: C. Caecilius Strabo was a senator like Pliny, making it difficult to plead against him (although not impossible), as the members of the senate were required to keep the peace between each other.³⁸ Pleading on the opposing side could have damaged the relationship between the two senators, as Pliny makes clear by stating that although they are not too close, their connection is still friendly.³⁹ To make things even more difficult, C. Caecilius Strabo was at this point designated suffect consul. His consulship is dated to the end of the year 105, only a few years after Pliny's own consulship in 100.⁴⁰ So, besides the fact that a consul was not to be trifled with, Pliny wished to refrain from discrediting the consulate itself – which he held in great esteem – by pleading against a person holding office.⁴¹ Pliny's high regard for the future suffect consul and the possibility of provoking discord between himself and C. Caecilius Strabo are dismissed by the fact that he owes Q. Corellius Rufus, and therefore his daughter Corellia Hispulla, who thus became Pliny's *cliens* in both the sense of being a *client* in court and the literal (Latin) sense of being a *cliens* in his debt.

Unfortunately, we learn nothing more about the case from Pliny, although there are other letters in the collection addressed to Corellia Hispulla. At least one of them confirms the picture of Pliny being devoted to the woman primarily because of her father; when Corellia Hispulla asks Pliny to recommend a guardian and teacher to her son, he is pleased to recommend his friend Iulius Genitor. Although this request reveals some form of relationship, the author again begins his letter by praising the deceased Q. Corellius Rufus before getting to the topic, making it clear that he is helping Corellia Hispulla find a teacher because he wants her son to become a person of similar qualities as his grandfather.⁴² There is therefore ample evidence in Pliny's own words that the

36 PLIN. *Ep.* 4.17.9.

37 As a negative example see *Ep.* 2.1: Pliny is disappointed and sees it as a breach of *fides* to L. Verginius Rufus, when the person responsible for building Rufus' tomb delays and thus doesn't honour their friendship beyond death.

38 BRUNT (1988), p. 359, 361, 369-372; FLAIG (2005), p. 209-210.

39 PLIN. *Ep.* 4.17.2: *Est quidem mihi cum isto, contra quem me advocas, non plane familiaris sed tamen amicitia.*

40 PLIN. *Ep.* 4.17.1.

41 GERMERODT (2015), p. 60.

42 PLIN. *Ep.* 3.3.1.

deceased Q. Corellius Rufus was his primary point of connection to the family, rather than his living daughter.⁴³

Network map

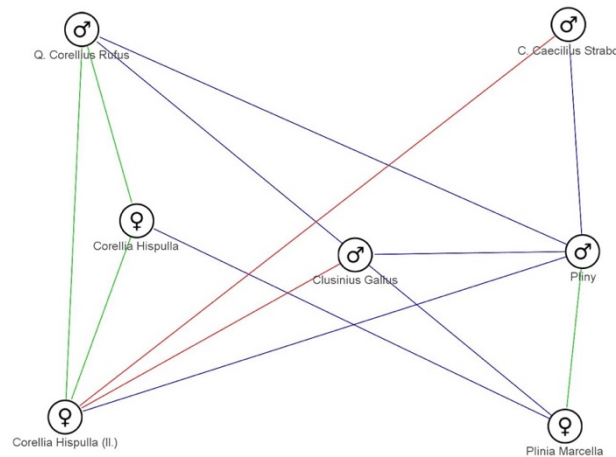


Fig. 2

4 A personal feud

My third case study of Pliny's network is a great deal more complex than the previous two and is based on *Epistulae* 1.5. Pliny writes to his close friend Gaius Voconius Romanus to describe what had happened several years ago in a court session between himself and Marcus Aquilius Regulus: both men had pleaded in the same lawsuit, but on opposing sides, in the case of a woman named Arrionilla, for reasons not mentioned. It was then the year 93, when Domitian had exiled some stoic philosophers suspected of belonging to the emperor's political opposition in order to foment upheaval.⁴⁴ As it happened, several of these philosophers were friends of Pliny, so M. Aquilius Regulus took the opportunity to attack the opposing lawyer personally: he asked Pliny what he thought of the loyalty of Mettius Modestus, suffect consul in the year 82 and one of the banned philosophers, attempting to throw Pliny off balance so that he would either lose the lawsuit or else compromise himself by admitting that he

43 SHELTON (2013), p. 204 also comes to the conclusion that there is "no conclusive evidence of a close connection between Pliny and Corellia Hispulla's husband [...]", adding that Pliny most likely corresponded with him merely to keep in touch with the family. This can be seen as an indication of rather loose ties to Corellia Hispulla as well.

44 SUET. *Dom.* 10.3.

was connected to the political opposition. Pliny recognised the trap and evaded it gracefully, thereby shaming M. Aquilius Regulus in public.⁴⁵

This event further worsened the already strained relationship between the two senators. Although such animosities were common among the relatively small group of senators, the *mos maiorum* required them to at least give the appearance of unity in public life.⁴⁶ M. Aquilius Regulus was subsequently under considerable pressure from his fellow senators to reconcile with Pliny; but he seems to have been afraid of Pliny rejecting him, so instead of talking to Pliny himself, he approached several of Pliny's friends – Caecilius Celer, Lucius Fabius Iustus, and finally the revered Titus Vestricius Spurinna – to mediate between M. Aquilius Regulus and Pliny.⁴⁷ It was some time later before M. Aquilius Regulus addressed Pliny in person, asking forgiveness not for the trap in court, but for yet another insulting remark at some other time.⁴⁸ When Pliny hinted at the real cause of his ire, M. Aquilius Regulus turned pale and tried to talk his way out of it by stating that he hadn't intended to hurt Pliny but rather the exiled (and defenceless) Mettius Modestus, thus only making matters worse.⁴⁹ Because Pliny wasn't sure of what to do – act against M. Aquilius Regulus or simply drop the entire dispute to keep the peace – he decided to wait for the exiled *amicus* Iunius Mauricus to return to Rome and ask him for advice.⁵⁰

This entire case is interesting because it involves a large number of people across several strands of time, all of whom were connected and influenced each other. First, let us look at the main characters in this episode, beginning with M. Aquilius Regulus. He had been an informant in the times of Nero and Domitian,⁵¹ thereby gaining favour from the emperors and a vast fortune; but also he made enemies among the senate.⁵² After Domitian's assassination in 96, those who aided the regime were prosecuted; as M. Aquilius Regulus had acted against several of Pliny's older friends, Pliny, although himself a protégé of Domitian,⁵³ decided to prosecute M. Aquilius Regulus as a big fish in the pond,⁵⁴ perhaps in an attempt to evade prosecution himself by immediately aligning with the new political situation. It is therefore no surprise that M. Aquilius Regulus happens to be one of the most frequently mentioned (and the most well-

45 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5.4-7.

46 BRUNT (1988), p. 359, 361, 369-372; FLAIG (2005), p. 209-210.

47 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5.8. See also HAMMOND (1938), p. 129; ASH (2013), p. 217-218.

48 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5.11-12.

49 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5.13.

50 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5.10/15.

51 Cf. CASS. DIO: 1, 2, 65, 66, 67, 68; TAC: *Agricola*; SUET: *Domitian*.

52 TAC. *Hist.* 4.42; PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5.1; ASH (2013), p. 215-216.

53 URNER (1993), p. 38, 201; GIBSON/MORELLO (2012), p.35. GERMERODT (2015), p. 82-84.

54 SHERWIN-WHITE (1966), p. 93-94.

described) person in the entire collection of letters,⁵⁵ showing how important this man was to Pliny, especially since he was some kind of nemesis to the author, being the embodiment of everything Pliny hated.⁵⁶

As previously stated, open animosity between the Roman upper classes was avoided if possible, so we can surmise that the addressee, C. Voconius Romanus, must have been very close to Pliny to receive a letter with such delicate content. The correspondence with this *eques* was indeed very intimate: letters to or about him can be found throughout the entire nine books published by Pliny himself,⁵⁷ including personal matters only shared between close friends, such as mocking other senators, grieving for lost loved ones or keeping track of the love-hate relationship with M. Aquilius Regulus.⁵⁸ Pliny also used his private and political influence several times to support and promote C. Voconius Romanus, going so far as to try to convince both emperors, Nerva and Traian, to elevate his friend to the senatorial ranks.⁵⁹

What about the men approached by M. Aquilius Regulus to defuse the situation? We know nothing about Caecilius Celer, aside from him being one of Pliny's friends; L. Fabius Iustus was acquainted with both Pliny's good friend P. Cornelius Tacitus and Pliny himself, and held positions such as suffect consul in 102, and as governor of Moesia Inferior and then Syria in 105-108 and 108/9-112, respectively.⁶⁰ Titus Vestricius Spurinna, a two-time consular and honoured with a triumphal statue,⁶¹ was both well-respected and a mentor to Pliny.⁶² Pliny's reverence for Ti. Vestricius Spurinna went so far as to take the elderly man's daily life as an example for his own, just as Cn. Fuscus Salinator would later do with Pliny's. By trying to get these three men to talk to Pliny, M. Aquilius Regulus clearly didn't simply choose random people to mediate, but close friends to whom Pliny would most likely listen; Ti. Vestricius Spurinna in particular, who was approached last, may have exerted his influence to appease his mentee.

Even more important is the man on whose behalf Pliny pleaded for Arrionilla in the first place: Quintus Iunius Arulenus Rusticus, suffect consul of

55 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5, 2.20, 4.2, 4.7, 6.2.

56 GERMERODT (2015), p. 40-41, 74-75.

57 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5, 2.1, 2.13, 3.13, 6.33, 8.8, 9.7, 9.28, 10.4.

58 GIBSON/MORELLO (2012), p. 149; GERMERODT (2015), p. 147-148.

59 PLIN. *Ep.* 10.4. SYME (1960), p. 365 argues that Pliny's recommendation wasn't successful and Voconius Romanus never became a senator.

60 ECK: *DNP*, Vol.4, col.376/377, s. v. Fabius.

61 PLIN. *Ep.* 2.7.1.

62 PLIN. *Ep.* 3.1.6: *Quam pulchrum illud, quam dulce secretum! Quantum ibi antiquitatis! Quae facta, quos viros audias! Quibus praeceptis imbuare!*

92 and yet another close friend of Pliny's. Some 20 years earlier, during the reign of Nero, he had tried in vain to veto the senate's sentence, condemning the stoic philosopher and Publius Clodius Thrasea Paetus to death on charges of being a political opponent after having written a political lampoon of Nero. Now himself under suspicion of being part of some political opposition (not least because he still publicly honoured P. Thrasea Paetus), Q. Arulenus Rusticus would be sentenced to death by Domitian some time later (after the lawsuit in which Pliny pleaded for Arrionilla), most likely still during the course of the emperor's exiling or killing his opponents in the year 93, during which Mettius Modestus had previously been exiled.⁶³ It would be none other than M. Aquilius Regulus who hauled Q. Arulenus Rusticus before the courts.⁶⁴

Iunius Mauricus, for whom Pliny waited desperately to receive some advice on how to deal with his adversary, was the brother of Q. Arulenus Rusticus, part of the political opposition since Nero's reign, for which he was also exiled by Domitian. He was pardoned by Nerva and later became one of his most influential advisers.⁶⁵

Finally, we have Arrionilla and her husband Timo; these are little more than names to us, although they were likely known to the contemporary addressee C. Voconius Romanus. By name they might have belonged to the family of Thrasea Paetus, as Sherwin-White has suggested.⁶⁶ The fact that Pliny pleaded for her during Domitian's cleansing of his political enemies makes it likely that Arrionilla and Timo were themselves suspected of playing a part in the 'treason' of their relatives.

To understand the temporal complexity of the entire situation and the network of people involved, let us break the whole matter down: M. Aquilius Regulus had acted as a *delator* during the reigns of Nero and Domitian (and perhaps also in between). In Nero's time, Iunius Mauricus and Thrasea Paetus had been among the philosophers opposed to the emperor, for which Thrasea Paetus was put to death. Iunius Mauricus' brother Q. Arulenus Rusticus had made a futile attempt to save him, thereby drawing suspicion on himself.

When Domitian purged another wave of opposition in 93, he exiled Mettius Modestus and Iunius Mauricus. Around the same time, Q. Arulenus Rusticus asked Pliny to plead for Arrionilla, most likely because she and her husband were also suspected of being part of the opposition. M. Aquilius

63 ECK: *DNP*, Vol. 2, col.66, s. v. Arulenus.

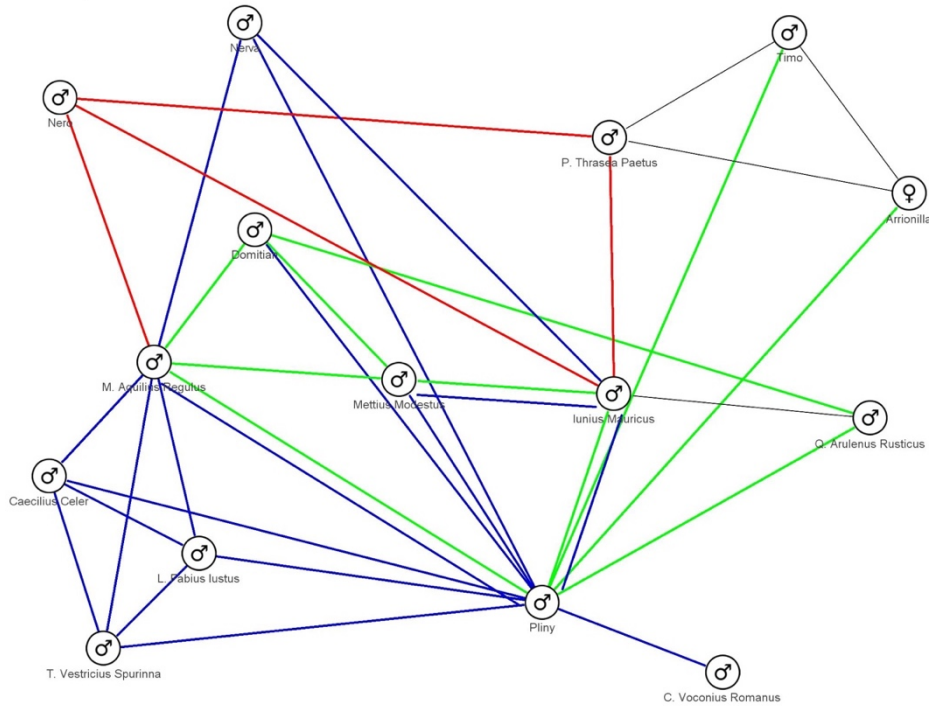
64 PLIN. *Ep.* 1.5.2.

65 ECK: *DNP*, Vol.6, col.67, s. v. Iunius.

66 SHERWIN-WHITE (1966), p. 97.

Regulus pleaded against Arrionilla, in the process laying a trap for Pliny to betray either himself or Mettius Modestus.

Network map

Fig. 3⁶⁷

In the time of Nerva (and thus in new political circumstances), M. Aquilius Regulus was placed under pressure by his fellow senators to reconcile with Pliny, so he asked Caecilius Celer, L. Fabius Iustus, and Ti. Vestricius Spurinna to mediate peace. Pliny, unsure of what to do, waited for Iunius Mauricus to return from exile and give some advice. Around this time, Pliny writes about this state of affairs to C. Voconius Romanus.

No letter survives that could shed some light on how this situation eventually ended, but the outcome isn't so important to us. What is relevant is the complexity of the network involved in this matter: a group of people, acquainted and active with or against each other for decades, adding new people who were formerly uninvolved and losing others as time went by, always locked in some form of feud between the political establishment and its willing helpers

67 Connecting ties are color-coded: red indicates the rule of Nero, green for Domitian, blue for Nerva and Trajan. Ties rendered in black are indicative of family relationships.

on one side, and the philosophical opponents and their friends on the other. These different networks crossed paths time and time again during the course of at least 30 years, thereby involving several generations of people in the same struggle. This case is thus an excellent example of how networks functioned in Roman antiquity.

5 Conclusion

Politics, marriages, and lawsuits, although they are not always separable, provide excellent case studies for how networks function. The sources for such networks in Roman times are sparse, to be sure, but nonetheless help us to gain insight into at least one part of Roman society. The *Epistulae* of Pliny are thus an invaluable source of information.

I have chosen just three of the dozens of instances where his network came into effect. At first, the marriage of the families of Lucius Iulius Servianus and Gnaeus Pedanius Fuscus Salinator might seem trivial, but it nonetheless reveals several interesting aspects: it shows Pliny as a point of intersection between both families/network clusters. However, he was not simply some anonymous person who happened to be related to the two men and their families; Lucius Iulius Servianus had been a friend and mentor to Pliny for years and attained the *ius trium liberorum* for him.

We can also infer that, over the years, the two men exchanged several other favours that are not necessarily mentioned in the letters, further strengthening their relationship. Pliny's detailed description of the young Gnaeus Pedanius Fuscus Salinator belies the first impression of the mentee as being unimportant to Pliny due to his infrequent appearance within the collection. Both men were dear to Pliny; he feels like part of their respective families, so much so that he promises to treat the future offspring of this new relationship as if they were his own.

When Corellia Hispulla needs a lawyer in a case against designated consul Caecilius Strabo, Pliny doesn't hesitate to help the woman, as could be expected. Somewhat surprising, however, is the fact that he does so primarily because Corellia Hispulla is the daughter of Quintus Corellius Rufus, yet another old friend and mentor, whom Pliny owes a great deal. Although Quintus Corellius Rufus has been dead for some years, the strong network ties still induced Pliny to help his friend, or rather his friend's daughter. Of course, there was still the issue of having to plead against a fellow senator. Pliny, who held the *mos maiorum* in high esteem and thus attempted to keep the peace (unless he was afraid of the peer pressure), would have wished to refrain from making an enemy of another senator and soon-to-be consul. Still, his ties and liabilities to Quintus Corellius Rufus took the upper hand in Pliny's considerations.

The third and final example of Pliny's network must be viewed from several different angles – in terms of the time, events, and people involved – in order to fully grasp and understand it. Unlike the other two case studies, this particular demonstration of Pliny's relations within the Roman elite is not a simple event, nor a snapshot of his network that reveals people and events at a given moment in time – if you look closely, it doesn't even have a single centre. Instead, it contains several events over a span of almost a lifetime, comprising more than a dozen people (that we know of) who are connected to one another by various types of relationships. Some of these people, especially the brothers Iunius Mauricus and Quintus Arulenus Rusticus on the one side and Marcus Aquilius Regulus on the other, were part of these events from the beginning, while others, such as the otherwise unknown couple Timo and Arrionilla (and even Pliny himself), entered and left this ongoing chain of events as time went by.

Pliny's network included hundreds of people from all social backgrounds, from emperors to freed men, and spanned his entire lifetime. The tools of network analysis make it possible to visualise the often complex relations between individuals and clusters which would otherwise be extremely hard to keep track of. In this way, a comprehensive picture can be drawn of not only Pliny's network itself, but also of the Roman elite from the late first and early second century in which it is firmly rooted. Impressive as it is, a final question remains: was Pliny exceptionally well connected, or can we consider him rather average, thus deducing that his peers had a similar or even higher level of connectedness? This question is not easy to answer, as no other Roman collections the like of Pliny's *Epistulae* have survived. There are Cicero's letters, of course, but he lived in another period of Roman history, one where political allegiances and the justification of decisions were even more important. However, we can draw certain important conclusions from Pliny's own time and letters, albeit indirectly: first, the author reveals on several occasions how his own contacts were connected to each other, be it as family, colleagues, or veterans of the legion. Rather than being isolated clusters, they tended to know each other, more often than not connected by several intersections, therefore creating a true network, rather than merely a series of loose relations that happened to be connected to Pliny.

Second, beside his own letters, Pliny replies to several letters from *amici* in which his friends themselves elaborate on their own extensive relations, especially when it comes to political recommendations and asking for favours. We can therefore conclude that social connections – the more the better – were a necessity in early imperial Rome. This doesn't come as a surprise, of course: Rome was hierarchically structured, led by a strong emperor with vast powers. Having as many connections as possible to the highest tiers that were close to the centre of power defined an individual's position. It seems that the old adage was as valid back in Roman times as it is now: it's not only about who you are, but also who you know.

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