CHAPTER ONE

PLINY THE ELDER'S ATTITUDE TO WARFARE

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Introduction

Although the vast *Natural History*, published in 77,\(^1\) was the product of a peaceful era, military service had certainly played a central rôle in Pliny the Elder's life. He himself had served in both Lower and Upper Germany under some prestigious commanders, Domitius Corbulo and Pompeius Secundus, and on the Rhine, he had apparently enjoyed *castrense contubernium*, 'companionship of the camp' (HN pref. 3) with the young Titus, now emperor.\(^2\) Despite having a windpipe that was, his nephew says (Pliny *Ep*. 6.16.19), weak and often inflamed, Pliny still commanded the fleet at Misenum, the post that he held when he was famously killed aged 55 during Vesuvius' eruption.\(^3\) Any views he expresses in the *Natural History* about warfare, therefore, are articulated by a man with practical experience in that sphere.

Moreover, even if the precise details of Pliny’s actual career in Germany have prompted scholarly debate, we can clearly see his calculated efforts to embrace the persona of a military man in the *Natural History*’s preface. When he quotes (in a modified way) from Catullus’ opening poem, calling the poet his *conterraneus*, ‘fellow-countryman’ (HN pref. 1),\(^4\)

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\(^1\) See Baldwin (1995) for the date of composition.

\(^2\) Syme (1958) 60–62, Healy (1999) 5–7, and Beagon (2005) 2–5 discuss Pliny’s career. The dating of his service in Germany is controversial, but the consensus is that he had ‘three tours of duty, in which he campaigned against (a) the Chauci (AD 47), under Domitius Corbulo, (b) the Chatti (AD 50), in Upper Germany during the governorship of Pomponius Secundus, and (c), in Lower Germany, as a colleague of the future emperor Titus’ (Healy (1999) 5). See also Malloch (2005) for the date of Corbulo’s first campaign in Lower Germany. We do have an inscription (*CIL* XIII.10026.2) from a horse-trapping referring to Pliny as equestrian *praefectus* and linking him to Xanten (Vetara).

\(^3\) *erat Miseni classemerque imperio praesens regebat* (Pliny *Ep*. 6.16.4). On the Vesuvius letters, see Berry (2008), also Gibson in this volume.

\(^4\) On the preface, see Howe (1985) and Morello in this volume. Pliny’s quotation of Catullus 1.3–4 playfully casts himself as the poet (the massive *Natural History* is far from being a *libellus!*) and Titus as Catullus’ addressee, Cornelius Nepos, who is cited by Pliny as a source; cf. Gibson in this volume on the same nexus of relationships.
Pliny quickly follows up this tag by jovially reminding Titus that he will of course recognise this castrense uerbum, ‘military slang’ (HN pref. 1), even if we ourselves do not. Pliny here proudly accentuates his own military heritage, and in turn compliments Titus, whose successes as a general in Jerusalem were widely known (and indeed much more recent and prominent than Pliny’s own military exploits). We can perhaps see in Pliny’s soldierly camaraderie an attempt to cash in on Titus’ military reputation for his own advantage.\(^5\) He certainly seems keen to establish his military credentials from the start. In that connection, it is worth commenting on the syntax at the opening of the preface: the first long and sprawling sentence (running from libros down to uelles at the end of section three) is sustained to an extraordinary degree by multiple periphrases and paratactic clauses in apposition.\(^6\) Could this rhetorical strategy be a self-conscious effort to cast himself as the stereotypical gruff soldier? Soldiers were supposed to be notoriously unconcerned with elegant Latin, in that they were far too busy fighting to polish their rhetorical skills, so Pliny duly obliges (however disingenuously) with a syntactically shambolic opening.\(^7\)

We can see too that Pliny has robustly bolstered his military identity through the choices made during his earlier literary career. From the nephew’s letter about his uncle Pliny’s works, we know that his ‘opening salvo’ was a technical treatise de iaculatione equestri, ‘about throwing a javelin from horseback’ (Ep. 3.5.3).\(^8\) The nature of literary debuts is usually expressive, and Pliny, who wrote this piece while commanding a cavalry unit, clearly aimed to corroborate his authority as an auctor by his practical experience as an actor, a man of action in the field. This endorsement recalls Sallust’s politically shrewd Marius, who explosively berates generals sprung from the nobility for learning their craft from books:

\(^5\) Murphy (2004) 61 sees the dedication to Titus as one of a ‘chain of transactions’, also featuring Pliny’s meticulous citation of his sources.

\(^6\) For a discussion of Pliny’s style in the body of the work, see Healy (1999) 79–99.

\(^7\) On the traditionally gruff speech of a military man, see Rhet. Her. 4.65, Liv. 2.56.8, 4.41.1, 10.24.4, Quint. 11.1.33, and Tac. Hist. 4.73.1. Cicero stresses that generals need to have practical experience, whatever their theoretical understanding of the profession (Off. 1.18.60). Lucian reminisces about an unnamed historian who wrote a bare record of events, ‘pedestrian and ordinary, such as a soldier … might have written’ (Hist. Consocr. 16).

\(^8\) Pliny himself refers to this work, which contained a description of the ideal horse from which to throw javelins (HN 8.162). Tacitus perhaps used it as a source at Germ. 6.2. On the Younger Pliny’s account of the Elder’s literary career, see Gibson in this volume.