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Preferred panel: 'The Powers of Persuasion'

The art of persuasion in Pliny, *Epistles* 8.14

In *Epistles* 8.14, Pliny purports to consult the distinguished jurist Titius Aristo on a recent senatorial vote (the year is AD 105). The consul Afranius Dexter had been found dead, and his freedmen suspected of complicity. In a complicated piece of psephological rhetoric, Pliny succeeded in outmanoeuvring his opponents to secure acquittal for these freedmen. This letter re-enacts his performance in the debate, as Pliny subjects his readers to a barrage of legal sophistry. Curiously, though, he spends the first third of the letter in an apparently irrelevant digression, as he laments the suppression of the senate in Domitian's principate.

This letter, the third longest in Pliny's collection, has been largely ignored; where it has been read, it has been easily dismissed for its allegedly faulty composition and arid argumentation (e.g. Sherwin-White 1966, Talbert 1984). An attentive reading, however, reveals that this letter is not mere padding, nor simple self-glorification. Pliny's art lies between the lines, in an extraordinary and hitherto unappreciated series of allusions to Tacitus' *Agricola*. Where Tacitus used his first work to portray the revival of the literary voice after the silence of Domitianic servitude, Pliny reworks Tacitus' language to make his own contribution to the Trajanic revival, in an epistolary reinvigoration of senatorial government.

Pliny's letter both parades his act of persuasion in the senate, through his narrative of the debate, and simultaneously constructs an artful act of persuasion in the text itself. Just as the *Agricola* is both a celebration of freedom restored and a call for slavery to be left behind, so Pliny presents his paradigmatic consultation of Aristo as a call for senatorial participation, as he stakes *his* charter for a brave new world of Trajanic governance.