

## Notes on Pliny's Panegyric of Trajan

Addressed to the emperor Trajan, this speech cannot be understood without a little bit of background about the previous two: Domitian and Nerva.

Domitian had ruled from A.D. 81 – 96, and was widely regarded as one of Rome's "wicked" emperors (at least by the senatorial class, which has provided us with most of our source material and which suffered most from his paranoia and cruelty; the general population seemed generally indifferent to him). He is one to whom Pliny refers when he speaks of a "bad prince".

Domitian was murdered by members of his own household in 96 without having clearly designated a successor. In such cases the senate formally had the right to appoint new emperor. In past however (as for example after the murder of Caligula and the suicide of Nero) the army had stepped in and imposed its preferred candidate on the senate by force. This time however, the senate moved quickly and appointed an emperor of its own choosing before one could be imposed on it by the army. That emperor was Nerva, an elderly jurist who enjoyed considerable prestige in the senate, but was relatively unknown among the soldiers.

The one group in society that had genuinely liked Domitian had been the Roman army, and they now demanded satisfaction for his death from Nerva in the form of the execution of Domitian's assassins. Nerva who, like most of the senatorial class had hated Domitian and had hailed his murderers as heroes, initially resisted, but was forced to hand the assassins over when the Praetorian Guard, the army detachment that acted as garrison of Rome and the emperor's personal body guard, revolted and besieged Nerva in his palace. This is what Pliny refers to when he writes the paragraph beginning "The revolt of the praetorians was a great disgrace to our age..."

Nerva survived the revolt, but his lack of support from the military had been exposed as a potentially fatal weakness. To shore up his position the emperor, who was childless, decided to adopt Trajan, who was then the commander of one of the largest Roman armies in the field – the army of the Rhein, which guarded the borders of Gaul against incursions by German tribes. In doing so he gained an ally who did enjoy prestige in the army and had troops at his command, and this in turn allowed Nerva to live out the last few months of his life in peace. On his death his adopted son ascended to the throne. This the background to the rest of the paragraph just cited.