



## [Pliny the Younger, Letters VIII.24](#)

Exhortation to an imperial legate to respect free cities of Achaëa.

**Name of the author:** Pliny the Younger

**Date:** 104 CE to 108 CE

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Letter

**Title of work:** Letters

**Reference:** VIII.24

**Commentary:**

The letter presented here is an excerpt from the eighth book of Pliny's correspondence, which includes three letters which can be dated not earlier than 107 or the first quarter of 108 CE. Many other letters of book VIII deal with subjects or addresses which can also be found in book VII or IX. Thus, the idea of a joint publication for books VII to IX may be possible (see Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, p. 38-39, 41). Around 107-108 CE, Pliny experienced a transitional period in his public career. He had already fulfilled his suffect consulship in 100 CE and retired from his charge of curator responsible for the bed and banks of the Tiber (fulfilled between 104 and 107 CE), but he had not yet been chosen to be the governor of the province of Bithynia and Pontus – the province where he probably stayed between 110 and 112 CE (for Pliny's career and his correspondence, see [Pliny the Younger, Letters VII.32](#)).

In the whole correspondence of Pliny, eight letters are addressed to a Maximus (II.14; VI.11; VI.34, VII.26; VIII.19; IX.1 and 23). The question of the identity of the Maximus mentioned in this letter of Pliny cannot be reconstructed with certainty. It is now common to identify him both with Sextus Quinctilius Valerius Maximus (known thanks to an inscription of Alexandria Troas dated between 97 and 100 CE, see *CIL*, III, 384; *ILS*, 1018; *I. Alexandria Troas* 39; about this identification see *RE* 14.2 [1930] s. v. "Maximus" n° 2, col. 2540 [Groag]; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> M 399), and with the Maximus mentioned by Arrian (Arrian, *Epicteti Dissertationes* III.7). Following these identifications, his career could be reconstructed in this way: he received the *latus clavus* from Nerva – *quaestor* of Pontus and Bithynia (97/98 CE) – tribune (100-101 CE) – praetor (around 103 CE) – *corrector* of the free cities in Achaëa (see *I. Alexandria Troas* 39).

In this letter Pliny exhorts Maximus to fulfil his mission efficiently. His depiction of what should be an ideal administrator is structured in two parts. In the first (§ 2-4), he advises him to be tactful when he intervenes in the municipal affairs of these free cities. In the second (§ 5-6), Pliny advises him not to be excessively severe or proud. The subject and the arguments developed by Pliny in this letter appear as a condensed version of the letter that Cicero addressed to his brother Quintus in 59 BCE – when the latter had been chosen as proconsul of Asia. As in Pliny's letter, Cicero exhorts his brother to be a flawless governor, but, at the same time, he asserts that initially, he did not want to give him advice (see Cicero, *Letters to his brother Quintus* I.1.18 and 36; quoted in Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, p. 477; for a comparison of the two texts Zucker, "Plinius," p. 209-232). The influence of Cicero's text on Pliny's letter is obvious if we consider the passage in which Cicero justifies the fact that his brother has to show respect towards the peoples of Asia because the latter are civilised – contrary to the peoples from Africa, Spain or Gaul who are characterised as barbaric – and that they have been the first to be so: "If the draw had appointed you to rule savage and barbarous peoples in Africa or Spain or Gaul, you would still, in virtue of your humanity, to have to think of their interests and to devote yourself to their needs and welfare. But when the men that we rule are from a people who is not only civilized but thanks to whom, it is believed that civilization have passed to others, assuredly above all we ought to give [this benefice] above all to those from whom we have received it" (Cicero, *Letters to his brother Quintus* I.1.27; Latin text freely available [here](#); the reference is quoted in Béranger, "Cicéron," p. 119, n. 9). The reference to *humanitas* or the presentation of the Greek world as the cradle of civilisation are ideas that we can also find in Pliny's letter. Thus, this letter sent to Maximus was clearly a stylistic exercise which enabled Pliny to propose a restyled version of the famous letter of Cicero to his brother, and to prove his skills as a literary man (Béranger, "Cicéron," p. 119).

For what concerns the status of a free city at the beginning of the second century CE, it is important to recall that under the Principate, around sixty communities in the Roman East had this privileged status. However, only a small



selection of them (8) obtained this status after Actium. During the High Empire, their number continued to evolve as some of them were suppressed by the emperors (see Fournier, *Entre tutelle romaine*, p. 469; Millar, “*Civitates liberae*,” p. 104-105). Under the High Empire, the main issue for most of the free cities was more to preserve their existing privileges, rather than to obtain new ones or to conclude new treaties with Rome. From Rome’s perspective, to grant freedom to a city became much more an act of propaganda vowed to boost Rome’s generosity rather than a real reward for deserving cities (see Guerber, “Le thème de l’autonomie,” p. 124-128; about the evolution of the “privilege of freedom” granted by Rome to Achaean cities, see Hoët-van Cauwenberghe, “Rome et la liberté”). Scholars have extensively debated the degree of autonomy of free cities during the High Empire. According to one historiographical tradition, free cities would have become more or less the equivalent of provincial cities submitted to Rome, keeping just some kind of symbolic prestige attached to their title and eventually some very limited privileges. From a different perspective, another tradition has highlighted that these communities continued to be autonomous concerning some administrative or judicial issues (for the judicial field see Fournier, *Entre tutelle romaine*, p. 469-501). This debate is actually central for the understanding of Pliny’s letter, from which emerges a contradiction between the free status of these Greek communities of Achaëa – many times recalled by Pliny – and Roman supervision of them – here embodied by the sending of Maximus. This contradiction is obvious in the formula according to which Maximus was sent “to put in order the situation of free cities” (§ 2 and 7 *ad ordinandum statum liberarum civitatum*). For what concerns Maximus’s office, he mentions that his “mission” (*legatio*) had been entrusted to him by the emperor “as a reward” (*praemium*) (§ 8), and that he had the *imperium* and the fasces (§ 6). This means that Maximus, as every *corrector*, had a coercive and a judicial power. Maximus is the first *corrector* in charge of the province of Achaëa and, more generally, the first *corrector* attested during the imperial period (see Guerber, “*Les correctores*,” p. 218; Fournier, *Entre tutelle romaine*, p. 480). Usually the *corrector* stood for the civic or provincial authorities so as to settle some specific unresolved problems. Thus, Maximus was an imperial commissioner in charge of extraordinary missions in the free cities of Achaëa which were not under the jurisdiction of the proconsul. (Fournier, *Entre tutelle romaine*, p. 480). The nature of the tasks probably entrusted to Maximus may have been to set in order cities which had financial difficulties or which were involved in inter-rivalries (Griffin, “Nerva to Trajan,” p. 117). This intrusion of Roman officials into the affairs of Greek free cities does not mean that they totally lost their civic autonomy. Julien Fournier has shown that, from the Principate onwards, free cities such as Aphrodisias, Athens or Sparta continued to have a particular judicial status which was still taken into account and respected by Roman authorities. Even during the second century CE, these free cities (and also to a lesser extent the provincial cities, see Fournier, *Entre tutelle romaine*, p. 394-396) still had a judicial autonomy but it was “selective” (Fournier, *Entre tutelle romaine*, p. 501). Having these remarks in mind, Pliny’s words about the fact that Sparta or Athens’s freedom had become, at his time, an illusion seem exaggerated: “Have in mind that this is the land which provided us law and statutes not after having defeated us, but at our request; that it is Athens you go to and Lacedaemon you rule; and that to snatch them from the remaining shadow (*reliquam umbram*) and the name that is left of their freedom (*residuum libertatis nomen*) would be a harsh, cruel and barbaric act” (§ 4); “Remember what each city was once, but not so as to despise her for having ceased to be so” (§ 5). These sentences have been put in relation by some scholars to the fact that Greek free cities would have lost most of their autonomy under the High-Empire (Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, p. 479). Nevertheless, for Julien Fournier, it is probable that these passages do not have any concrete legal value. For him, Pliny’s remarks are full of nostalgia and may have echoed the “*doxa*” of his time (Fournier, *Entre tutelle romaine*, p. 476). We think that Julien Fournier is right in rejecting the idea that Pliny’s assessments about the prestigious past of the cities of Achaëa have to be understood as reflecting the actual legal status of these communities. However, the fact that the whole province of Achaëa received freedom and immunity from Nero (see [Nero and the Freedom of Greece](#)), and that this measure was later declared invalid by Vespasian (Suetonius, *Vespasian* VIII.6), may have provided the background to this idea that the freedom enjoyed by the Greeks had become an illusion. Yet, the sending of *correctores* in free cities of Achaëa – as attested here with Maximus – should not be interpreted as being the manifestation of a global degradation of the privileges of Greek free cities because of Rome’s constant intrusions.

To prove to Maximus that he had to respect the free cities of Achaëa in which he was sent on mission, Pliny uses an interesting argument, namely the fact that this part of the world has to be respected because of its ancestral character. Such an idea is especially developed when Pliny writes: “Have in mind that this is the land which provided us law (*iura*) and statutes (*leges*) not after having defeated us, but at our request (*petentibus dederit*)...” (§ 4). In this passage it is particularly striking to see a Roman author who asserts that Roman laws are not superior and even that they are nothing other than some kind of derivative of Greek law. The idea that the Romans borrowed heavily from the Greeks, especially in cultural or philosophical domains, is an idea which is not new. Cicero himself developed this theme to prove that the Romans improved everything they borrowed or inherited from the Greeks (see Cicero, *Tusculanes* I.1; see Méry, “Rome et les barbares,” p. 23-25; for a study dealing with the influence of Greek philosophy on Roman reflexion and conception of law, see Ducos, *Les Romains*). Pliny fits



in with this tradition which consisted of asserting that Rome owed much to Greece, but he does not expand on Roman superiority. Pliny takes the trouble only to specify that this Greek legal inheritance had not been imposed upon the Romans, but that it is the Romans themselves who chose to keep a part of it. The fact that Pliny exhorts Maximus to respect Greece because of its ancestral character is typical of the Roman ideology conveyed by many Roman emperors or Roman officials, that Hellenism was a constitutive and important element of the Roman Empire, and that Rome had to respect the cultural glory of Old Greece (for this argument, see Ferrary, "Rome, Athènes," p. 192; Hoët-van Cauwenberghe, "Rome et la liberté," p. 310).

The last point of this letter of Pliny which is particularly interesting is the way he represents Greek communities. Myles Lavan has shown that in his letters and especially in the *Panegyric of Trajan*, Pliny fitted in with the tradition which consisted of presenting Roman rule as an enslavement and in assimilating Rome's subjects in the provinces of the Empire to slaves (Lavan, *Slaves to Rome*, p. 95-97). The letter he wrote to Maximus is of particular interest because Pliny tries to conciliate his use of the vocabulary of mastery and slavery with a "rhetoric of freedom" which had been constantly used by the Romans to manage their relations with Greek communities from T. Quinctius Flamininus' declaration during the Isthmian games of 196 CE (Lavan, *Slaves to Rome*, p. 97; for Roman sources dealing with the proclamation of 196 BCE see [Livy, History of Rome XXXIII.33](#); [Valerius Maximus, Memorable Doings and Sayings IV.8.5](#)). Pliny actually exhorts Maximus to respect the free status of these cities he had to supervise and to not transform their freedom into slavery (*servitus*, § 8). To give more weight to his argument, Pliny introduces a comparison with the former function he fulfilled in Bithynia: "You must then make more effort so as not to seem to have been more human, more noble and more skilled in a remote province than in one nearer Rome, among servile people rather than among free, when you were appointed by lot rather than by selection, when you were still a novice and unknown before being tested and proven" (§ 9). Pliny opposes here a noble, ancestral and free continental Greece (which plays the role here of the province of Asia in Cicero's letter) to a remote, barbarian and servile Eastern province, Bithynia (which corresponds to Africa, Spain and Gaul in Cicero's letter). As Myles Lavan has noticed, Pliny's aim is not simply to reuse a common notion according to which Greeks from continental Greece were much more civilized than the Eastern Greeks who were supposed to be slaves (this idea is well analysed in Isaac, *The Invention of Racism*, p. 383 and n. 12, see more generally 304-323). The opposition made by Pliny is not only geographical or even moral, this opposition is also related to the condition of the people who lived in these two parts of the Empire. Pliny's message is that Maximus had to deal more respectfully with some of the communities of Achaea which had a glorious past and which were free, whereas the communities in Bithynia are reduced to ordinary provincial communities which were subjected to Rome and whose inhabitants are assimilated to slaves. As Myles Lavan rightly remarks: "... the rhetoric of freedom serves to reinforce rather than contradict the idea that Rome's subjects are her slaves" (Lavan, *Slaves to Rome*, p. 100). This simplistic distinction of status between the communities of the Empire, justifying that the free one should be treated with more care, appears also in the medical metaphor used by Pliny: "Observe a doctor, though in sickness there is no difference between slaves and freedmen, yet the freedmen are treated with more kindness and attention" (§ 5). However, even if the free communities seem to be enhanced here, they remain the ill patients of a doctor which can be identified with the emperor (see Isaac, *The Invention of Racism*, p. 399, for a comparison of Pliny's medical metaphor with other similar metaphors used in philosophical works, see p. 399, n. 101). Once again, behind Pliny's kind words about Greek free cities, the idea that Rome remains a superior, even paternal, entity is still present.

To conclude, this letter highlights a Roman point of view on the relations between Greek free communities and Roman administrators during the second century CE. Pliny admits that the free status of these cities requires respect. However, the fact that they are compared to ill patients cured by a doctor-emperor echoes an idea also expressed in the letter, namely that their freedom is nothing other than a fiction (Lavan, *Slaves to Rome*, p. 101). Such a way of presenting the situation of Greek cities is of course influenced by his pro-Roman perspective, by the omnipresence of Roman speech of mastery and slavery when one had to deal with the provinces of the Empire, but also by the constraints imposed by the literary exercise (to echo Cicero's work). A brief investigation into what could have been the more concrete functioning of the administrative and judicial instances of these free cities of Achaea during the second century CE shows, however, that the interrelations between them and the representatives of Roman power were much more complex and mixed. The respect for local autonomies of these communities is something which is defended by Pliny himself, but this respect had nothing to do with freedom.

Keywords in the original language:



- [amicitia](#)
- [antiquitas](#)
- [Athena](#)
- [barbarus](#)
- [Bithynia](#)
- [civilis](#)
- [civitas](#)
- [deus](#)
- [dignitas](#)
- [fama](#)
- [fasces](#)
- [foedus](#)
- [gloria](#)
- [Graecia](#)
- [homo](#)
- [honor](#)
- [humanitas](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [ius](#)
- [Lacedaemon](#)
- [legatio](#)
- [lex](#)
- [libera civitas](#)
- [libertas](#)
- [medicus](#)
- [meritum](#)
- [missus](#)
- [nomen](#)
- [odium](#)
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- [praetura](#)
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- [quaestura](#)
- [religio](#)
- [reverentia](#)
- [senectus](#)
- [servitus](#)
- [status](#)
- [terror](#)
- [testimonium](#)
- [timor](#)
- [tribunatus](#)
- [umbra](#)
- [urbs](#)
- [virtus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Achaea](#)
- [Athens](#)
- [autonomy](#)
- [barbarian customs](#)
- [Bithynia](#)



- [civilisation](#)
- [corrector](#)
- [fasces](#)
- [freedom](#)
- [Greece](#)
- [Greeks](#)
- [illness](#)
- [imperial power](#)
- [law](#)
- [legate](#)
- [master](#)
- [mastery](#)
- [paternalism](#)
- [praetor](#)
- [provinces](#)
- [quaestor](#)
- [slave](#)
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- [Sparta](#)
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