



[Pliny the Younger, Letters X.6-7](#)

The Roman emperor and the grant of Alexandrian citizenship.

Name of the author: Pliny the Younger

Date: 98 CE

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: Letters

Reference: X.6-7

Commentary:

The tenth book of Pliny the Younger's correspondence gathers only letters exchanged between Pliny and the emperor Trajan. The first fourteen letters of this book are dated from the period preceding Pliny's appointment as governor (his official title was that of *legatus Augusti pro praetore consulari potestate*) of [Bithynia and Pontus](#), probably between 110 and 112 CE. From letter 15 to the end of the book are letters sent during Pliny's mission in Bithynia. The abrupt end of his correspondence in this book indicates that Pliny must have died in Bithynia in 113 CE.

For books I to IX of his correspondence, Pliny must have selected among his letters the ones which were the most elegantly written. Then, he adapted them for the publication (about the publication process see Zehnacker, *Pliny le Jeune, Lettres. Livres I-II*, p. xxii-xxiv; [Pliny the Younger, Letters VII.32](#)). However, the letters gathered in book 10 followed a publication process totally different from that of books 1 to 9. As Pliny died when he was in Bithynia, another person must have been responsible for the publication of the book. Thus, the letters gathered in this book were probably not embellished or rewritten. The other main difference is that, if Pliny was extremely selective in books 1 to 9 to pick up letters that fit in with his literary aims, it is probably most of the letters he exchanged with Trajan and certainly all the responses of the emperor that were retained and published in book 10 (Wynn, *Pliny the Younger*, p. 2, 4). The publication of Book 10 must have occurred with the permission of the reigning emperor, that is Trajan or Hadrian.

The two letters presented here can be dated between July and December 98 CE (see Sherwin White, *The Letters*, p. 63). At that time, Pliny was *praefectus aerarii Saturni* (prefect of the state treasury) in Rome (since January 98 CE). The fact that he was fulfilling this office explains that he knows the ways to forward requests to the ruling emperor. These letters are part of a group, *Ep. X.5-7*, whose main subject is the grant of Roman citizenship to Pliny's doctor (about the prominent role of doctors who had sometimes direct access to governors and emperors see [The doctor of Claudius is honoured at Kos](#)). Actually in *Ep. X.5* (not presented here), we learn that Harpocras was the freedman of a woman named Thermutis – an Egyptian name –, who died. By mentioning her death, Pliny must have implied that she had no heir who could have inherited her rights over her freedmen. Thus, Pliny justified his request to the Roman emperor who was the only one who could grant him Roman citizenship (Gonzales, "Les requêtes de Pliny," p. 40-41). We understand from *Ep. X.6* that Trajan first accepted this request. However Pliny had forgotten to tell the emperor that Harpocras was from Egypt, a part of the Empire where, as we will recall, the civic organisation and the hierarchy of legal statuses was unique. Pliny admits his error and says that the Roman emperor has to grant Alexandrian citizenship to Harpocras first. We will consider the context, the originality of the case and the reasons explaining these successive grants of citizenship.

From 27 BCE onwards, Egypt became an imperial province ruled by a prefect. The provincial society had been reorganized according to the needs of Roman imperial power, but a lot of pre-existing Egyptian and Ptolemaic specificities were preserved. The most important for us is the fact that most of the inhabitants of Egypt did not live in self-governing cities having a local citizenship. There were only three Greek cities – Alexandria, Ptolemais and Naucratis – up until the beginning of Hadrian's reign. Among these three cities, Alexandria was a very unique case. Its citizenship went back to the Ptolemaic period. After Egypt became a Roman province, Alexandria was both a Greek city and the place of the headquarters of the prefect of Egypt. According to a constitutional fiction, Alexandria was not considered as being located in Egypt. It was a singular entity associated with Egypt but which had its own independence. Only a part of its inhabitants were Alexandrian citizens. To be so one had to be born from two parents having this status (for a global presentation of the civic organisation in Roman Egypt and in Alexandria see Méléze-Modrzejewski, "L'Égypte," p. 442-444, 456-462; Bowman and Rathbone, "Cities and



Administration,” p. 110-127). The Egyptian provincial society was based on the opposition between citizen and non-citizen. There were two groups of citizens: the citizens from the Greek cities (the Alexandrians being the most numerous) and the Roman citizens. For what concerns the Roman citizens present in Egypt, they were Roman citizens who came from Rome for administrative, commercial or cultural reasons/duties. There were also some Greeks that the imperial power wanted to distinguish because of their civic responsibilities and their social rank (it is essentially the case of the most powerful Alexandrians), or who received Roman citizenship after having served in the local army (it is the case of the members of the Greek-speaking élites of the *ch?ra*). All the men who were neither citizens from one of the three Greek cities of Egypt nor Roman citizens, were considered by the Romans as “Egyptians” (*Aegyptii, Aigyptioi*). Among this huge group of peregrines from Egypt, the Romans distinguished the Hellene members by granting them a reduction of the annual poll-tax, the *capitatio* or *laographia* (see Méléze-Modrzejewski, “L’Égypte,” p. 463-466). Most of these Hellene members were inhabitants of the metropolis of a nome – that is of an administrative district –, landowners and were culturally Greek. For what concerns Harpocras, Pliny’s therapist, we know that he was a slave, that he was from the nome of Memphis (mentioned in *Ep.* X.10), and that he must have travelled to Rome with his patroness Thermuthis. The latter was an Egyptian *peregrina* who must have been part of the Hellenes, that is the upper-class, of the *Aegypti* of the nome of Memphis. We learn from Pliny that Thermuthis freed Harpocras who thus may have adopted the status of his former master (see Hirt Raj, *Médecins et malades*, p. 175-176).

The first question raised by these letters is related to the utility of Alexandrian citizenship. Was it a compulsory step in the procedure which had to be followed by every Egyptian who was granted Roman citizenship? And if it was actually the case, what was the utility of such a preliminary grant? In his letter, Pliny gives the impression that it was a necessary step: “I was informed by people more experienced than me that, as he is Egyptian, I ought first (*debuisset*) to obtain for him the Alexandrian citizenship, before the Roman one.” In addition, Pliny confirms that such a preliminary grant was very specific for the Alexandrians: “... I believed that there was no difference between Egyptians and other peregrines...”. Pliny’s ignorance of basic information about civic organisation in Egypt must have been a quite common phenomenon among senators of his time. Actually, since Augustus’s conquest, senators were not allowed to visit Egypt without the permission of the emperor (Sherwin White, *The Letters*, p. 569). However, on the mandatory nature of the double-step procedure for every Egyptian peregrine who was about to become a Roman citizen, Trajan’s response seems less clear. Trajan confirms that he knows the specificity of the situation in Egypt, as he takes the trouble to recall that, as the emperors before him, he “[do] not intend to grant Alexandrian citizenship carelessly”. Such an assessment has to be understood as a piece of evidence of the fact that the Roman emperors were reluctant to infringe upon Alexandrian affairs and rights. Because of the restraint he displayed, Trajan could thus not say explicitly that the grant of Alexandrian citizenship was a legal compulsory prerequisite for the grant of Roman citizenship. It is due to this difficult positioning that he writes to Pliny: “But, as you have already obtained Roman citizenship for your therapist Harpocras, I cannot refuse your other request (*huic quoque petitioni tuae negare non sustineo*)”.

First, it is interesting to examine the utility of this grant of Alexandrian citizenship from Harpocras’ situation and perspective. The main privilege of both the Roman citizens and the Greeks/Egyptians having a citizen status was to be totally exempted from the annual poll-tax, the *capitatio* (Méléze-Modrzejewski, “L’Égypte,” p. 469-470; Bowman and Rathbone, “Cities and Administration,” p. 112-114). Thus, one cannot argue that from a fiscal point of view an Egyptian who was granted Roman citizenship needed to become also an Alexandrian citizen. The main thing that Alexandrian citizenship provided him – aside from many privileges – was to be legally distinguished from the mass of the *Aegyptii*, who are usually despised in many Roman sources (Hirt Raj, *Médecins et malades*, p. 18-19, esp. n. 65; see [Juvenal, Satires XV.1-13](#)). However, the fact that Harpocras was a freedman makes it highly improbable that he could pretend one day to become an influent member of the Alexandrian elites. One can thus object that being a Roman citizen alone could have been sufficient for Harpocras to distinguish himself.

Thus, as it is hard to explain the utility of this grant of Alexandrian citizenship from Harpocras’ situation and perspective, it seems preferable to consider that this grant as a preliminary step before an Egyptian could become a Roman citizen was a necessity imposed by Roman legal procedures. Yan Thomas has rightly recalled that it is highly probable that a large part of personal grants of Roman citizenship by the emperor in favour of peregrines were undertaken conjointly with their inscriptions among the citizens of a Roman or Latin colony or *municipium*. Yan Thomas thus quotes, among others, the example of Dio Chrysostom’s maternal grand-father and mother who received Roman citizenship from the emperor and were also made citizens of the Roman colony of Apamea (see [Dio Chrysostom, Speeches XLI.8-10](#)). However, in Egypt, there was no Roman or Latin colony or *municipium*, but only three *poleis*. The emperor had thus to find a solution and, according to Yan Thomas, he would have chosen Alexandria because most of the Roman citizens of Egypt belonged to this city (Thomas, « *Origine* », p. 6-7, 89). We can add to Yan Thomas’s explanation that Alexandria was also the most prestigious of the three cities of Egypt.



Moreover, most of the Hellene members coming from every regions of Egypt and who were looking for new distinctions, applied for Alexandrian citizenship and not for that of Ptolemais or Naucratis.

Yan Thomas's explanation, which is for us the most relevant, goes against Diana Delia's thesis according to which Alexandrian citizenship was not a legal pre-requisite for the acquisition of Roman citizenship, but was some kind of intermediary check used to estimate if the candidate to Roman citizenship owned the necessary background – namely if he was familiar with Greco-Roman culture and civic life (Delia, *Alexandrian Citizenship*, p. 41-47, esp. 46; rightly contested in Thomas, « *Origine* », p. 7, n. 11). Yan Thomas's explanation has been recently slightly contested by Marguerite Hirt Raj. For her, the reason given by Thomas to explain the link between the city of Alexandria and the Roman citizens in Egypt is not fully complete, as it is only based on the fact that Alexandria was the place where the provincial archives were settled, archives which must have contained the documents related to the various *epikriseis* (that is requests for verification and confirmation of personal titles), among which those concerning Roman citizens (Hirt Raj, *Médecins et malades*, p. 17). Marguerite Hirt Raj hypothesizes that if Harpocras had been an *astos*, that is a citizen from Naucratis or Ptolemais, he could have become a Roman citizen directly after the imperial grant (Hirt Raj, *Médecins et malades*, p. 19). However, no evidence supports this idea. We thus consider that Yan Thomas's explanation remains the most relevant one. A preliminary grant of Alexandrian citizenship may have been the most simple procedure that the imperial power found to legally promote an Egyptian, who did not come from a city and who could not be registered into a Roman or Latin colony or *municipium*, to Roman citizenship.

The second main question raised by these letters is the role actually played by the Roman emperor into the grant of the Alexandrian citizenship. Pliny writes: "Therefore I pray you, so that I may lawfully enjoy your favour, to grant him (*tribuas ei*) the Alexandrine citizenship and the Roman one". In his response, Trajan says that he cannot reject Pliny's request, however he recalls that the grant of Roman citizenship is something serious which has to be done "following the practice established by [previous] emperors" (*secundum institutionem principum*). Then, Trajan asks Pliny of which nome he is from to send a letter to the Prefect of Egypt to relay information so that Harpocras can be inscribed on Alexandria's municipal lists. Scholars have debated whether the Roman emperor actually took the decision to grant Alexandrian citizenship, or whether his role was limited to transfer the case to the Alexandrians via the Prefect of Egypt (second hypothesis defended in Böhm, "Die Doppelbürgerschaft"; convincingly criticized in Sherwin White, *The Letters*, p. 570-571). If we follow the most wide-spread interpretation, according to which Trajan was actually responsible for the grant of Alexandrian citizenship, it would mean that the city of Alexandria did not entirely control access to its citizenship. Such a capacity of intrusion of the Roman authorities into the Alexandrian municipal matters has been justified by the fact that there was no *boulé* in Alexandria. Actually, Alexandria may have lost its *boulé* during the second century BCE, and, after Augustus's conquest and during all the first century CE, the Roman emperors decided not to put it back (about this point see Bowman and Rathbone, "Cities and Administration," p. 114-119; Méléze-Modrzejewski, "L'Égypte," p. 444). However, this situation does not mean that there was no self-administration in Alexandria. A small group of wealthy elites continued to share the most important civic offices (especially in the *gerousia*). As Alan Bowman and Dominic Rathbone recall, these magistrates and officials "had primary responsibility, albeit under Roman supervision, for access to its citizenship, and within that, to the privileged gymnasial group" (Bowman and Rathbone, "Cities and Administration," p. 117). But such a concentration of power into the hands of a few Alexandrian families and clans, without the supervision of a *boulé*, led to the burst of many revolts in the city under the High Empire (see the troubles with the Jewish communities under Caligula and Nero). As a consequence it was necessary, for the imperial power, to constantly supervise the organisation of this tumultuous city, much more than in Naucratis and Ptolemais.

Another source can be put in relation with Pliny's letters because it also echoes the capacity of the Roman emperor to supervise the grant of Alexandrian citizenship. This source is the famous letter that Claudius addressed to the Alexandrians in 41 CE to respond to their complaints (*P. Lond.* 1912, see the English translation [here](#)). In this letter, Claudius confirmed all the rights of the *ephebes* (young men who were educated in the perspective of becoming the future Greek civic elite) who had been registered in the city, up to his accession. However, he ordered that those of servile descent had to be banned (*P. Lond.* 1912, 52-56). As Alan Bowman and Dominic Rathbone have analysed, Claudius seems to respond here to Alexandrian citizens who complained about the undue intrusion of Jews or of Egyptians into their citizen body. They rightly remark: "Claudius' letter illustrates that these procedures were liable to Roman supervision, but actual interventions were probably rare" (Bowman and Rathbone, "Cities and Administration," p. 115). Thus, the fact that Alexandria had no *boulé* does not directly explain why the Roman emperors could intervene into Alexandria's affairs. The absence of *boulé* increased the instability in the city and as a consequence, during all the High Empire, it was necessary for Rome to control these tumultuous civic and powerful elites. Claudius and Pliny's letters show that the Roman emperors could intervene into the procedures related to the grant of Alexandrian citizenship only if the Alexandrians had asked for an imperial advice/intervention or if it was connected to Roman affairs – in Harpocras's case, a grant of Roman citizenship was at stake. Such kind of imperial care of not intervening excessively in Alexandrian affairs, especially by



granting carelessly its citizenship, evolved during the second century CE. An inscription from Sardis, dated from 212-217 CE mentions the record of the pankratiast Markos Aurelios Demonstratos Damas (see *IGRR* IV.1519; Strasser, “La carrière,” p. 258-273). In this inscription, whose dedicators were the four sons of the honoured pankratiast, it is interestingly mentioned that Marcus Aurelius and Commodus granted him Alexandrian citizenship “as if he had it by birth (?????????)” (*IGRR* IV.1519C, l. 10-13). This grant probably occurred after his numerous victories during the various competitions held at Alexandria in 176 CE (see Strasser, “La carrière,” p. 287, 294-296). This source thus appears as an interesting reference to the fact that, in the last decades of the second century CE, Roman emperors could grant Alexandrian citizenship to people who were not even Egyptian. The fact that it is specified that, thanks to this grant, Markos Aurelios Demonstratos Damas had to be considered as an Alexandrian by birth, shows that his grant was not only an honorific one. According to Jean-Yves Strasser, this effective citizenship could have provided extended privileges as, for instance, the fact that Markos Aurelios Demonstratos Damas’s sons might have been also registered among the Alexandrian citizens (see Strasser, “La carrière,” p. 287, n. 98). Compared to the issue exposed in Pliny’s *Letters* X.6-7, Markos Aurelios Demonstratos Damas’s case shows that, at the end of the second century CE, the emperors may have felt much freer to grant Alexandrian citizenship.

To conclude, these two letters show that a Roman emperor could grant another citizenship than the Roman one. This is a totally unique phenomenon which is not attested for any other city of the Empire. This imperial prerogative was exceptional and it can be explained by the specificities of the civic organisation in Egypt. By granting the Alexandrian and Roman citizenships to this peregrine Egyptian, Trajan probably followed the usual procedure which made such personal grants legal. Finally, it is important to recall that Pliny’s correspondence with the emperor is full of other requests of this kind. Actually, Pliny’s requests to grant Roman citizenship to peregrines or Junian Latins are concentrated in two periods: the years 98-99 CE (*Ep.* X.5 for Harpocras and two Junian Latins; *Ep.* X.6, 7 and 10 for Harpocras’s case; *Ep.* X.11 for various peregrines and three Junian Latins); and around 113 CE (*Ep.* X.104 for three Junian Latins; *Ep.* X.106 for a peregrine). As Béatrice Le Teuff has rightly noticed, the concentration of these requests at these two precise moments can be explained by the fact that the operations of the *census* had just ended in many Western provinces (if we accept her thesis that operations were also led under Nerva in 96-97 CE). Actually, when the officials in charge of the *census* proceeded to the complete review of the productive capacities of the cities and to the count of their populations – drawing a distinction between the Roman citizens and the peregrines – they may have also collected the requests of people who wanted a change of status and whom they accepted to recommend. Thus, it is logical that the provincial *census* was followed by the examination of the numerous cases connected to Roman citizenship and especially of requests to receive Roman citizenship (see Le Teuff, *Census*, p. 453-454, 457). The number of the letters sent to the emperor by Pliny shows that, in Pliny’s perspective, promoting close friends or acquaintances to Roman citizenship was a way to reinforce his status of patron and his clientele. From a broader perspective, it shows that at the end of the first or at the beginning of the second century CE, the grant of Roman citizenship to peregrines or peregrine freedmen was a procedure which remained closely controlled by the emperor himself.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Aegyptius](#)
- [Alexandrina civitas](#)
- [amicus](#)
- [beneficium](#)
- [census](#)
- [civitas Romana](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [epistula](#)
- [iatralipta](#)
- [indulgentia](#)
- [institutio](#)
- [ius Quiritium](#)
- [libertus](#)
- [manumissus](#)
- [necessarius](#)
- [patrona](#)



- [peregrinus](#)
- [petitio](#)
- [praefectus Aegypti](#)
- [princeps](#)
- [tribuo](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Alexandria](#)
- [Alexandrian citizenship](#)
- [autonomy](#)
- [citizenship](#)
- [civic council](#)
- [doctor](#)
- [Egypt](#)
- [Egyptians](#)
- [freedman](#)
- [Greek citizenship](#)
- [Greek city](#)
- [manumission](#)
- [master](#)
- [peregrine](#)
- [prefect of Egypt](#)
- [slave](#)
- [Trajan](#)
- [viritane grant](#)

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[Dio Chrysostom, Speeches XLI.8-10](#)

Praise of Rome's generosity regarding the grant of its citizenship and its sense of justice.



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