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## Biographers of the Caesars

*By Sir Ronald Syme, Oxford*

### I

From the War of Actium to Nero's end the Caesars cover a century: a theme to attract a historian even had he not already narrated the rise and fall of the second dynasty. The point of termination was given. Where to begin, that was the question. Cornelius Tacitus opted for the accession of Tiberius Caesar – perhaps still under influence from conventional views about the reign of Caesar Augustus.

Whatever date a historian selected, he broke the continuity of events and persons, and he needed introductory matter or resumptive elucidations. After a time the author of the *Annales* became acutely aware of his predicament. Too late now to change – but if life were vouchsafed he would go back and recount the earlier epoch<sup>1</sup>.

Biography is easier, as adepts show by their alacrity in other ages. For describing an individual life, no problems of structure need arise – and few from a sequence, if that be the design. Plutarch began with Augustus and might therefore have ended with Nero. He produced eight lives of emperors, down to Vitellius, according to the Catalogue of Lamprias. Only the Galba and the Otho survive. They permit a firm assessment. These products are not biographies, comparable with either the *Parallel Lives* or with Suetonius *De vita Caesarum*. Rather the narration of two brief reigns, to go on and conclude with the death of Vitellius in December of 69.

The Galba leads off with suitable reflections on stability and discipline, on generals and soldiers, with instances drawn from both Greek and Roman history. The disturbances that ensued after the fall of Nero were alarming. Yet one blames less the rival contestants for the power than the troops, violent and venal all through. The exposition then passes to the Praetorian Guard, and to its commander Nymphidius Sabinus. The Guard destroyed Nero and Galba in turn (Galba 1f.).

The preface thus announced a rapid sequence of rulers – like figures of tragedy, so Plutarch says. The narration sets out with summary remarks about the career of Galba (before his proclamation in Spain), proceeding to the insurrection of Julius Vindex and the battle won by Verginius Rufus. It runs without a break into the next reign. Otho's antecedents (mainly the Poppaea story) had already been explained (Galba 19f.).

<sup>1</sup> Tacitus *Ann.* III 24, 3.

The procedure is clear. Plutarch sliced up a narrative history. He employed it for Nero, and also for Vitellius<sup>2</sup>. Where its author began and where he ended is another question. That historian was used by Tacitus. Parallels in Books I and II of the *Historiae* prove it. Hence a double advantage. Plutarch did not much modify his source, save by abridgement and omissions. Why should he? One of the annalistic predecessors of Tacitus comes through. Comparison serves to aliment study and foment controversy in source criticism. Better perhaps, testimony to the superior talent and idiosyncrasy of the consular historian<sup>3</sup>.

Scholars cannot help casting about for a name. One of the obvious might not be the answer<sup>4</sup>. According to Flavius Josephus, many writers both Greek and Roman dealt with Nero and the events in sequel to Nero's end<sup>5</sup>. For present purposes, enough to acquiesce in *Ignotus*, as is expedient in similar investigations<sup>6</sup>.

## II

A Greek came out with the earliest imperial biographies linked in a series. That is a surprise. The Latins appear negligent and imperceptive. When and how did the idea and design dawn upon Plutarch?

He once travelled in northern Italy in the company of the consular Mestrius Florus. He then inspected Otho's tomb at Brixellum and he contemplated the battlefield between Bedriacum and Cremona<sup>7</sup>. That experience, it has been inferred, aroused his interest in the events of 69 – and in the general theme of civil strife and disruption<sup>8</sup>.

The date of that journey evades precision. Mestrius Florus, it appears, was one of the Transpadane senators: his daughter married one of the Caesernii, a family of the better sort at Aquileia<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, the name 'Mestrius' is patently native by origin, not Latin<sup>10</sup>. It passed to Plutarch from his friend and patron.

2 The standard view, but disallowed by E. Paratore, *Tacito* (Milano 1951) 381.

3 See especially E. Groag, *Jahrbücher für cl. Phil.*, Suppl.-Band 23 (1897) 761ff.: a contribution much neglected in the sequel.

4 That is, Cluvius Rufus (proposed by Mommsen in 1870), or Pliny. Groag mooted the claims of Fabius Rusticus. In support of Pliny, observe G. B. Townend, *Am. J. Ph.* 75 (1964) 337ff.

5 Josephus *BJ* IV 495f.

6 Thus in *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) 181, cf. 675.

7 Plutarch *Otho* 14, 2; 18, 2. Cf. C. Theander, *Plutarch und die Geschichte* (Lund 1951) 7ff.

8 S. Mazzarino, *Il Pensiero storico classico* II 1 (Bari 1966) 146f.: 'il tema della tremenda crisi romana del 69 d.C.'.

9 *PIR*<sup>2</sup>, C 178.

10 In CIL V twenty-two occur, none of rank. The veteran of Legio XX in Val Trompia (attributed to Brixia) furnishes a clue (V 4923). Another early Mestrius is registered on the gravestone of L. Plinius, a soldier of that legion who is described as *domo Trumplia*. He died far away (ILS 2720: near Plevna, in Bulgaria). The nomen, Illyrian in the wide sense of that term, is frequent in the Balkans, even being employed as a cognomen.

The fancy would be pleasing (but nothing more) that Plutarch was in Italy and at Rome about the time of his consulship (c. 75), or that Mestrius brought his client with him when returning from the proconsulate in Asia a dozen years later<sup>11</sup>.

Plutarch visited Rome more than once during the reign of Domitian<sup>12</sup>. In January of 89, when Antonius Saturninus raised rebellion at Moguntiacum, a spontaneous rumour spread, announcing the defeat of the usurper before the news reached the capital. Plutarch reports the matter<sup>13</sup>. He may have been there.

Again, Plutarch mentions a conversation with Avidius Quietus (*suff.* 93). It concerned his governorship of Achaëa, which probably fell in 91/2. There is a further indication. When Arulenus Rusticus was attending a lecture of Plutarch a soldier turned up, bearing a missive from Caesar. Rusticus refused to interrupt the lecture. He was consul suffect for the last four months of 92.

In the autumn of the next year calamity overtook the group that maintained allegiance to the memory of Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus – and were liable to be carried further than they intended in hostility towards the government. Suspect to the despot, they became vulnerable to rival factions and ambitious prosecutors. Arulenus Rusticus suffered the penalty of death, likewise Herennius Senecio and the son of Helvidius Priscus. Others went into exile, notable Junius Mauricus, the brother of Rusticus; and a number of the professors, their friends and associates, had to leave.

Plutarch had ties with the group through Avidius Quietus, if no others. His *Galba* carries a reference to Junius Mauricus, extolling his character and integrity<sup>14</sup>. That book, so some have inferred, was composed before the year 93<sup>15</sup>.

To have Plutarch writing Roman history during the reign of Domitian runs counter to most of what can be known or divined of his interests and occupations. For support, recourse is had to the unknown – or worse, to that which never happened. Plutarch stopped with Vitellius. He did not go on to narrate the reigns of the three Flavian emperors. If he had been writing under Trajan nothing (so it is opined) would have prevented him in that happy season<sup>16</sup>.

The notion is persistent – and traditional. Mommsen enounced it, in a casual fashion. But Mommsen went on in the next breath to infirm it<sup>17</sup>. He said

11 For the date of the proconsulate see now W. Eck, *Senatoren von Vespasian bis Hadrian* (München 1970) 85f. (invoking AE 1966, 426: Ephesus).

12 For the detail of his journeys, C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971) 22ff.

13 Plutarch *Aem. Paull.* 25, cf. Suetonius *Dom.* 6, 2.

14 *Galba* 8, 8 (Mauricus' remark in the Senate not long after the fall of Nero).

15 C. P. Jones, *op. cit.* 23.

16 E. G. Hardy in his edition (1890), cited by C. P. Jones, *JRS* 56 (1966) 71.

17 Mommsen, *Hermes* 4 (1870) 297 = *Ges. Schr.* 7 (1909) 226: 'es wird darauf nicht viel zu geben sein'.



nothing more about Plutarch's 'Caesars'; and some enquirers in the recent age betray no curiosity about the time of composition<sup>18</sup>.

The unreal proposition condemned itself. There was in fact something to deter him: the sheer difficulty of the enterprise and all the labour when he already had a satisfying and unitary theme. Taking on *intacta et nova* (to use Pliny's phrase) you run a risk of giving offence: *levis gratia, graves offensae*.

Thus Pliny, about the year 105<sup>19</sup>. The hazards under Domitian were obvious to a man of mature years and judgement such as Plutarch. Nero was still alive, in more ways than one. Some of his friends and agents stood high in favour with the Flavian emperors. Of his victims a certain C. Fannius compiled biographies in three volumes – subsequent to the end of the Flavian dynasty<sup>20</sup>.

When Domitian's reign began to take an evil turn, the decline of a dynasty and the menace of civil war (with the reality in January of 89) became themes of relevance all too sharp and perilous. Senators had to be careful. Even a Greek scholar got into trouble. Hermogenes of Tarsus was put to death by Domitian *ob quasdem in historia figuras*<sup>21</sup>.

### III

The fall of the second imperial dynasty announced liberty renascent in unwonted concord with principate. The exiles now came back, the women who had shared their lot, the professors. The most prominent senator, although not the first to arrive, was Junius Mauricus. He confirmed his reputation for independence by his bold answer to the Emperor Nerva at a dinner party – which no doubt enjoyed wide currency at the time<sup>22</sup>.

Like Mauricus, Verginius Rufus earned a personal tribute in the Galba (10, 7). Nerva chose him as colleague in the *fascēs* to open the year 97, as *consul tertio*. The old man, extracted from the long retreat in which he outlived rulers who feared and hated him, died in the autumn of the year. At the state funeral the laudation was spoken by the illustrious orator Cornelius Tacitus, consul at the time<sup>23</sup>. That occasion moved Tacitus to commemorate another good man,

18 Nothing in K. Ziegler on the biographies, RE *Plutarchos* (1951) 895ff.; E. Paratore, *Tacito* (1951); S. Mazzarino, *Il Pensiero storico classico* II 2 (1966). Those writers had ample space at their disposal.

19 Pliny *Epp.* V 8, 12.

20 Pliny *Epp.* V 5.

21 Suetonius *Dom.* 10, 1.

22 Pliny *Epp.* IV 22, 6. Nerva's question (perhaps not innocent) concerned a person of evil notoriety in the late years of Domitian. Thirty years previously Mauricus had declared that they might soon be regretting Nero (*Galba* 8, 8).

23 Pliny *Epp.* II 1, 6. The time of that consulship (presumably a two months tenure) has not yet been ascertained. The riot of the Praetorians and the elevation of Trajan belong about three months before Nerva's decease on January 28 of the next year, as emerges from Pseudo-Victor *Epit.* 12, 9 (the only evidence).

Julius Agricola. The preface of the biography advertised an intention to go on and write history, as testimony to recent enslavement and present felicity. Domitian's reign was the first design, which the author came to modify, putting his inception on the first day of the year 69.

The name and fame of Verginius Rufus recalled warfare and tumult and the proclamation of emperors. There was something else. In October of 97, the Guard Prefect Casperius Aelianus organised a riot and compelled Nerva to surrender for vengeance the assassins of Domitian. His government collapsing, Nerva had recourse to a virtual abdication, taking as associate in the power one of the army commanders, namely Ulpius Traianus, the legate of Upper Germany. The scene and the events evoked startling parallels: Nerva's plight like that of Galba and an adoption, but an adoption which instead of precipitating a crisis averted the threat of an armed proclamation.

Plutarch in his Galba visited lavish condemnation on Nymphidius Sabinus and the Praetorians. Such was the theme, and such the facts. There is no call to invoke the history that repeated itself three decades later.

Plutarch paid a handsome tribute to Verginius Rufus: after trouble and turmoil he came to the enjoyment of tranquil old age<sup>24</sup>. The compliment was in place whenever penned, whether Verginius was still among the living or recently deceased. If Plutarch wrote in 97 or soon after, he was under no compulsion to chronicle the third consulate of Verginius. That kind of documentation is foreign to his normal manner. Sosius Senecio (*cos.* 99) received the dedication of the Parallel Lives, and also of Table Talk. His rank, his occupations, his two consulships are nowhere introduced<sup>25</sup>.

#### IV

Nothing forbids the hypothesis that Plutarch composed his 'Eight Caesars' in the aftermath of 96. *Nunc demum redit animus*. From this essay in Roman history the path leads to the ambitious and excellent project of installing Roman worthies on parity with the heroes of old Hellas, and thereby extolling concord between the two nations. The season was propitious. Asia Minor had already brought forth senators and consuls. Surpassing Domitian on that rubric, Trajan accorded signal favour, notably to the dynastic families, the descendants of kings and tetrarchs. Plutarch is aware of the process but he refrains from attaching the label of rank to any named person. A Roman senator and consul makes his entrance as 'the magnificent King Philopappus'<sup>26</sup>.

That Plutarch now joined the pack of intellectuals who flocked to Rome to

<sup>24</sup> *Galba* 10, 7.

<sup>25</sup> For Sosius in relation to Plutarch see the excellent accounts of E. Groag, *RE Sosius* 11 (1927) 1188ff.; C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (1971) 54ff.

<sup>26</sup> *Quaest. conv.* I 10, 1. That is, C. Julius Antiochus Epiphanes Philopappus (*suff.* 109).

profit from the *felicitas temporum*, there is no sign. The sage of Chaeronea deplored the constraints imposed on authorship by residence in a small town, without the resources of ample libraries<sup>27</sup>. His 'Caesars', intended for Greek readers, did not entail access to a variety of books<sup>28</sup>.

The Galba and Otho make that clear. They exhibit a single source. That is, apart from two references of a personal nature. He visited the field of Bedriacum in the company of Mestrius Florus; and he was able to report what Julius Secundus said about Otho's insistence on giving battle<sup>29</sup>. Both items derive from experience many years previous. Secundus, the secretary of Otho, entered the Senate, so it appears, but died about the year 80<sup>30</sup>.

By a minor irony, the Plutarchian account of the march from Bedriacum in the direction of Cremona furnishes in one notorious problem clearer guidance than does the consular historian. It is straightforward. Tacitus (it can be argued) ran into trouble because he conflated two sources<sup>31</sup>.

One Latin historian followed by both writers, that is the ready and accepted explanation. It was promulgated by two archegetes in the science of 'Quellenforschung', Peter and Mommsen<sup>32</sup>. That conclusion is not easy to get round, and not many have tried.

A recent attempt appeals to Plutarch's inadequate command of Latin. He only learned the language late in life, so he affirmed in his preface to the biographies of Demosthenes and Cicero. Plutarch normally preferred Greek sources where available, as evinced by his practice in the Parallel Lives. Such existed for Nero's end and for the events of 69. Josephus bears witness. Plutarch may have used one of them<sup>33</sup>.

Plutarch's knowledge of Latin is a delicate question<sup>34</sup>. Inspection of the context in which the modest disclaimer occurs will suggest a doubt. What he confesses is not defective command of the language, rather incapacity to assess the niceties of style and idiom. As will suitably be recalled, Plutarch wrote a treatise on the art of self-laudation without incurring dispraisal<sup>35</sup>.

When different authors relate the same events, especially in narrations of warfare, resemblances cannot fail to emerge: in arrangement, in episodes, and

27 Plutarch *Dem.* 2.

28 C. P. Jones, op. cit. 80: 'not the fruit of deep research or unorthodox views'.

29 Probably personal rather than from a written source, cf. C. Theander, *Plutarch und die Geschichte* (Lund 1951) 10f.

30 As argued by C. P. Jones, *Harvard Studies* 72 (1968) 279ff.

31 *Tacitus* (1958) 678f.

32 H. Peter, *Die Quellen Plutarchs in den Biographien der Römer* (1865) 28ff.; Th. Mommsen, *Hermes* 4 (1870) 298.

33 C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (1971) 76ff.

34 For a full discussion, H. J. Rose, *The Roman Questions of Plutarch* (Oxford 1924) 11ff.

35 Dedicated to Herculaneus. That is, the senator of the proud Euryclid house (*PIR*<sup>2</sup>, J 302). Groag doubted (H 93) because Plutarch did not specify him as a Spartan.

even in language. There is a limit to variations. That is not always recognised by zealous adepts of 'Quellenforschung'. However, selection and emphasis reveal a writer: purpose and idiosyncrasy. That is manifest when Tacitus and Plutarch confront a comparison.

The problem of sources and derivations is complex and intricate. Why not? A *curiosum* in the long annals of erudition may be noted in passing. Some have fancied that Plutarch went to great pains. He followed Tacitus – and he supplemented Tacitus with an additional source. The corollaries for both authors are horrendous, extending beyond the presumed date at which the *Historiae* were published<sup>36</sup>.

Plutarch's Greek historian fails to convince. Moreover, allowance has to be made for evidence from Suetonius Tranquillus, who drew upon the common source in three of his biographies.

## V

On the hypothesis here adumbrated, Plutarch composed the 'Eight Caesars' not long after the assassination of Domitian. Since he was born about the year 45 and had visited Rome more than once, enough time had elapsed for him to acquire mastery of Latin adequate for his modest purposes. Other literate Greeks had recourse to secretaries or translators, as is patent for Josephus, even did he not avow it<sup>37</sup>.

Plutarch needed that help much more when he went on to the Roman biographies of his mature achievement, where his procedures offer problems, but no alarm or perplexity<sup>38</sup>. Among the earliest were the Lucullus and Cicero, so it appears; and there could be no Hellenic parallel after Marcus Antonius.

For his 'Caesars' Plutarch took encouragement from the *felicitas temporum* and there was a powerful impact from contemporary hopes and fears. Some two decades later Suetonius embarked on the books *De vita Caesarum*.

Plutarch has been acclaimed a forerunner<sup>39</sup>. The term is loose and ambiguous. Plutarch merely preceded, he did not show the way. Suetonius had already written *De viris illustribus*. That is, lives of men of letters, not only orators or poets but scholars. From that kind of erudite compilation, the transition

36 C. E. Borenus, *De Plutarcho et Tacito inter se congruentibus* (Diss. Helsingfors 1902); A. Momigliano, *Stud. it. fil. cl.* 9 (1931) 171ff. C. P. Jones suggests that on the contrary Tacitus may have read Plutarch and have corrected some errors (op. cit. 77f.).

37 Josephus *Contra Apionem* I 50. Indeed, he had secretaries who were influenced by the styles of Thucydides and of Sophocles.

38 For secretaries, C. P. Jones, op. cit. 84ff. For Plutarch's methods of composition, see now the full and convincing discussion by C. B. R. Pelling, *JHS* 99 (1979) 74ff.

39 Thus F. Della Corte, *Suetonio eques Romanus*<sup>2</sup> (Firenze 1967) 142: 'aprendo la strada a Suetonio'.



seemed easy to biographies of emperors. Further, the same technique of composition was detected, hence a literary doctrine, pushed however much too far<sup>40</sup>.

Suetonius made an early appearance in the correspondence of Pliny, described as a *scholasticus*, diffident in character and devoted to a life of studious leisure<sup>41</sup>. Brought into senatorial society through the patronage of the consular, though not perhaps achieving any deep penetration, he might have met eminent friends of Plutarch to whom Pliny addressed letters, such as Sosius Senecio (*cos.* 99) and Minicius Fundanus (*suff.* 107). Nor should Suetonius be deemed unaware of the writings. Though averse from ethics and theosophy, Suetonius might discover items of antiquarian interest in the other polygraph<sup>42</sup>.

As concerns Plutarch's 'Caesars', inspiration or emulation is another matter. Nor is dissidence or criticism worth invoking<sup>43</sup>.

Suetonius happened to adopt a different point of inception. He began with Julius Caesar. The choice was apt, and it illustrates changing estimations in imperial history. While exploiting the deified parent, Caesar Augustus set himself at a distance from C. Caesar, proconsul in Gaul and dictator. The successors professed conformity with the founder of the dynasty. Hence a long silence, not interrupted under the Flavian rulers. When the Emperor supervened who was a conqueror, Dictator Caesar came into his own at last. Trajan about the year 108 struck a series of commemorative coins. Caesar now surpasses Caesar Augustus – and on one issue the head shows a strong resemblance to Trajan<sup>44</sup>. The comportment of the historian Tacitus towards the memory of 'Dictator Caesar' is in concordance.

In the Suetonian biographies, one motive or purpose is no mystery. The author declares a contrast with the historians who chronicled public events year by year. Hostile to style and eloquence, the biographer is avid for the details they disdained, personal, peculiar or abstruse. He refrains from naming any Roman annalist subsequent to Livy, with the sole exception of Cremutius Cordus – who is cited once for a fact concerning the reign of Augustus<sup>45</sup>. In the sequel Suetonius suppresses mention of the aristocrat Servilius Nonianus (*cos.* 35), orator and proconsul of Africa. He merely referred to a *vir consularis* who in his annals reported something that happened on the island Capreae<sup>46</sup>.

The *Historiae* of Cornelius Tacitus no man of the time could ignore. Suetonius decided to write as though that masterpiece did not exist. Demonstrating his independence, he went back to the sources employed by the eloquent consular. The biographer made his own selection, for purposes of his own. Not there-

40 The famous thesis of F. Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie* (1901).

41 *Epp.* I 24, cf. 18 (diffidence as a barrister).

42 For example, the *Quaestiones Romanae*.

43 F. Della Corte has Suetonius 'in polemica con Tacito e Plutarcho' (op. cit. 111ff.).

44 M. Grant, *Roman Anniversary Issues* (Cambridge 1950) 100. Cf. *Tacitus* (1958) 434.

45 Suetonius *Aug.* 35, 2. Cordus and his history earn a mention in *Cal.* 16, 1, cf. *Tib.* 61, 3 (anonymous). 46 *Tib.* 61, 6.



fore to be blamed, and there is the parallel of Cassius Dio in a later age. Though Dio had looked into the *Annales* when writing about Tiberius Caesar (that cannot be excluded), he preferred to follow earlier historians, not always to advantage.

For events of the year 69, influences from Tacitus cannot be established in the biographer. He could not have done without the *Historiae* later on. Search and speculation is not remunerative. Suetonius might have culled the catalogue of ten consulars put to death by Domitian, on charges miscellaneous or trivial<sup>47</sup>. He betrays no sign of the fateful conjuncture in the year 93.

The second work of Tacitus presents baffling problems. Enough without relation or relevance to Suetonius – and there is a danger of circular argumentation. Traces of the *Annales* have been more often sought than found. Even where conceded, they do not amount to much<sup>48</sup>. The preceding observations about the *Historiae* are a deterrent.

On one assumption (it cannot be refuted) Tacitus set himself to his second task soon after he came back from the proconsulate of Asia in the summer of 113. The rhythm of the writing, that is a question, likewise publication. For present purposes, and to avoid entanglement in chronology, a simple proposition may be put up. Whether or no Suetonius had read portions of the *Annales*, awareness of *nescio quid maius* now on the way furnished an incentive. Suetonius proposed to come out with a counterpart or supplement to the annals of the first dynasty, going back to include Caesar and Caesar Augustus. That design he may have conceived before the death of Trajan.

Though industrious (a vast and varied production) this scholar was not eager to face his readers. About the year 105 Pliny had to administer a gentle rebuke. Suetonius lagged and delayed, whereas Pliny had advertised the product in some verses<sup>49</sup>.

Pliny died during the mission that took him to Bithynia. He bequeathed to Suetonius a patron not reluctant to furnish encouragement in literary efforts. It was Septicius Clarus, the friend to whom Pliny had dedicated a selection of his correspondence: not perhaps all nine books, only a first instalment<sup>50</sup>.

## VI

A stray notice in a later author discloses a precious fact. When *praefectus praetorio*, Septicius Clarus received the dedication of *De vita Caesarum*<sup>51</sup>. His tenure of the Guard can be fixed with some precision.

47 *Dom.* 10, 2–4.

48 *Tacitus* (1958) 781f., cf. in comment G. B. Townend, *Cl. Quart.* 9 (1959) 285.

49 Pliny *Epp.* V 20. Perhaps the books *De Viris illustribus*.

50 The first two books, or the first three, about the year 105.

51 Lydus *De mag.* II 6.

When Trajan died in Cilicia (in August of 117), one of the two commanders was with him, namely Acilius Attianus. The other, Sulpicius Similis, stayed behind at Rome. Various and valid reasons impelled the new ruler to make a change before long. One was promotion for his trusted friend and agent, Marcius Turbo. Hadrian on his way to Rome left Turbo on the Danube. It was an abnormal command, embracing Dacia and Pannonia Inferior<sup>52</sup>. The post stood equivalent in rank to Egypt or the Guard. Marcius Turbo duly acceded to the Guard in 119. For colleague, Hadrian assigned Septicius Clarus.

The *Historia Augusta* supplies the evidence (Hadr. 9, 4f.). From that enigmatic work few transactions in the Antonine age escape contact or contagion. The *Vita Hadriani*, on inspection even cursory, betrays two strands. The sober and accurate basic source was modified by a double operation – both drastically abridged and supplemented with anecdotal material of dubious quality. The distinction is clear, most of the sutures or doublets are obvious<sup>53</sup>.

In the present instance, no call for doubt or hesitation. On the appointment of the two prefects (9, 4f.) follows before long the funeral of Hadrian's mother-in-law (9, 9). Matidia died in December of 119<sup>54</sup>.

Marcius Turbo enjoyed a long tenure. That is no surprise. Septicius Clarus was cut short after a triennium. The cause and occasion is conveyed by the anecdote in the HA which reveals the fact that Suetonius Tranquillus held the post of imperial secretary *ab epistulis* (11, 3).

Both officials got into trouble during Hadrian's journey to the provinces of the West (he set out for Gaul and Germany in 121, crossed to Britain in 122 and, returning to the continent, spent the following winter at Tarraco). The item of central interest calls for close scrutiny. Hadrian dismissed Septicius and Suetonius (and many others) because their comportment towards Sabina offended against the *aulicae domus reverentia* (11, 3). Other anecdotal items follow (11, 4–7). The whole passage is an insertion – inserted between Hadrian's activities on the British frontier (11, 2) and his departure for the Continent (12, 1). As with a number of other deleterious pieces in the *Vita*, their origin may be divined: the consular biographer Marius Maximus<sup>55</sup>.

The allegation against Septicius and Suetonius may be waived and postponed. What matters is the chronology. Given the untidy practices of the compiler, a doubt became legitimate: did he introduce the passage in the proper place?<sup>56</sup> The two officials might in fact have incurred disgrace not while Ha-

52 *HA Hadr.* 6, 7; 7, 4. The doublet is of significant value.

53 Analysis of the structure, supported by four pieces of annotation which cite Marius Maximus, indicates that he is not the basic source. See G. Barbieri, *Riv. fil.* 32 (1954) 43. 62. 262ff. Insufficient attention was paid by many scholars in the sequel.

54 *CIL VI* 2080.

55 *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971) 113ff. Despite the argument from the structure some still claim Maximus as the basic source of the early biographies (Hadrian to Caracalla).

56 *Tacitus* (1958) 779.

drian was in Britain, but on some subsequent occasion. Perhaps indeed many years later, in 128<sup>57</sup>.

Reflection discountenances that notion. When the further text is examined, down to the remarks about frontier defences that conclude the western tour of the Emperor (12, 6), the uncertainty abates and lapses. The compiler was not inadvertent. He chose the right place for making his addition to the travel narration<sup>58</sup>.

So far so good: the year 122. There is something more: the scene of the misdemeanour that demoted the pair. Rome, while the Emperor was occupied with necessary tasks in the distant island, such was (and appears to remain) the standard doctrine<sup>59</sup>. It deserved rough treatment since it derives from modern and obsolete conceptions about the habits of imperial administration. The functions and the movements of three persons are in cause.

First, the secretary *ab epistulis*. While Rome stands and must stand as *caput imperii* (with rulers all too often reluctant to leave it), the government is where the Emperor happens to be. Caesar cannot manage without the head of chancery<sup>60</sup>. Not so the *quaestores Augusti*, his normal channel of communication with the Roman senate. When Hadrian departed in 121, the pair of quaestors forfeited their function. One of them, Minicius Natalis, went to Africa to serve as legate under his father the proconsul<sup>61</sup>.

Second, the Guard Prefect. Where Caesar goes, a *praefectus praetorio* accompanies him; and if Caesar goes abroad, a second prefect (normally desirable for other reasons) becomes a necessity. The examples are adequate, and the campaigns of Trajan or the peregrinations of Hadrian leave room for conjecture, several prefects missing all record<sup>62</sup>.

Visiting the provinces and armies of the West, Hadrian took with him Septicius Clarus, a person of cultivated tastes, to be presumed congenial company on a long tour. Marcius Turbo stayed behind, to watch over the capital. In military matters, as in most arts and sciences, the imperial polymath commanded expertise in alarming abundance.

Third, the Empress. Her husband could not stand Sabina, so it is alleged. Hadrian would have liked to discard her. On the demotion of Septicius and

57 Thus J. A. Crook, *Proc. Camb. Phil. Soc.* 4, 1956/57 (1958) 18ff. It was there assumed that Sabina's rank and pretensions were enhanced by the title 'Augusta', precisely in 128. – That title was perhaps conferred much earlier, on the decease of her mother Matidia Augusta in 119, cf. W. Eck, *RE Suppl. XV Vibia (?) Sabina* (1978) 910f.

58 As firmly stated by G. B. Townend, *Historia* 10 (1961) 108f.

59 A. Macé, *Essai sur Suétone* (Paris 1900) 214; G. Funaioli, *RE Suetonius* (1931) 597; A. Stein, *RE Septicius* (1923) 1557; W. Eck, *RE Suppl. XV Vibia (?) Sabina* (1978) 911.

60 F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London 1977) 90: 'not improbable' (to be taken as an understatement).

61 ILS 1061, cf. 1029. The item helps to date the proconsulate of the parent (*suff.* 106).

62 See further *Guard Prefects of Trajan and Hadrian*, *JRS* 70 (1980), forthcoming.

Suetonius follows the comment *uxorem etiam ut morosam et asperam dimissurus, ut ipse dicebat, si privatus fuisset* (11, 3). One observes the nature of the documentation, *ut ipse dicebat*. The Vita also reports the *fabula* that Hadrian poisoned Sabina (23, 9). Further, from one and the same source ultimately derives a statement about her reciprocated detestation<sup>63</sup>.

Such is the sum total of the 'evidence' about the relations between emperor and consort. Nothing else is on record anywhere. Contracted in the year 100 for political reasons, the marriage might not have proved a comfort to either partner. If some estrangement in fact ensued, giving rise to malicious gossip, that is irrelevant to the present argument.

For that matter, it is far from certain that Trajan and Plotina formed a well matched and harmonious couple. High society imposes constraints, and it demands respect for appearances. Plotina was present at the death bed in Cilicia. So was Matidia, the mother of Sabina – who herself, one supposes, was with her husband in Syria. Thirteen years later she shared the tour in Egypt, as is declared by the verses which Julia Balbilla inscribed on the statue of Memnon<sup>64</sup>. To refuse Sabina a journey to the western provinces is a bold and baseless presumption.

Suetonius Tranquillus in Britain, therefore<sup>65</sup>. The proposition when first put forward earned scant notice or favour<sup>66</sup>. Now to be iterated therefore, pointing out some of the corollaries if it be denied that three persons accompanied Hadrian in the year 121: Suetonius Tranquillus, Septicius Clarus, Vibia Sabina.

The sojourn on the island opens prospects both instructive and entertaining. In the first instance, the composition of *De vita Caesarum*. If the author was away from Rome for something like a year and a half during Septicius' tenure of the Guard (119 to 122), sundry hypotheses about the date (rather perhaps the dates) of the biographies come under question and will have to be modified.

## VII

The inscription which the city of Hippo Regius set up in honour of Suetonius Tranquillus can no longer be deferred<sup>67</sup>. It excites curiosity about the *patria*

63 Pseudo-Victor *Epit.* 14, 8. Sabina refused to have a child by him, *ne ex eo ad humani generis perniciem gravidaretur*; and Hadrian drove her to suicide.

64 *PIR*<sup>2</sup>, J 650, cf. A. and E. Bernand, *Les inscr. gr. et lat. du Colosse de Memnon* (Le Caire 1960) n° 29 and n° 30.

65 As proposed in *Tacitus* (1958) 779.

66 Observe for example F. Della Corte, *Suetonio eques Romanus*<sup>2</sup> (1967) 10: 'solo il Syme ... seguito da qualche altro critico inglese.' – That scholar was oblivious to H.-G. Pflaum, *Les Carrières équestres* I (Paris 1960) 220, cf. 224 – who made the assumption, likewise without appeal to lengthy argumentation.

67 Published by E. Marec and H.-G. Pflaum, *CRAI* 1952, 78ff., whence *AE* 1953, 73. For a



of the biographer – and nothing precludes an origin from Africa<sup>68</sup>. More important, it registers two posts anterior to the secretaryship *ab epistulis*. Suetonius was imperial procurator *a studiis* and *a bibliothecis*. The editors assumed that Suetonius held those posts at the beginning of the reign of Hadrian<sup>69</sup>. A rapid sequence of promotion in that season would not surprise<sup>70</sup>.

A different view found firm proponents: before the death of Trajan<sup>71</sup>. It was Hadrian who conferred the charge *ab epistulis*. Perhaps in 119, precisely, when Septicius Clarus acceded to the Guard. That Septicius carried his friend forward in his train, that was an attractive notion. Yet not the sole or necessary explanation. The scholarly Suetonius had claims of his own as an author. The new ruler was eager to advertise indulgence towards polite studies (in contrast to his predecessor) as he showed by appointing Septicius Clarus – a choice that some may have found anomalous<sup>72</sup>.

Sundry uncertainties subsist. Despite arguments to the contrary, it might still be maintained that Suetonius did not acquire the posts *a studiis* and *a bibliothecis* before the accession of Hadrian. On the other hand, if they belong earlier, they are of clear relevance to his use of imperial archives. Before the Hippo inscription emerged, an easy assumption held the field. The secretary *ab epistulis* won access to precious documents – and perhaps an incentive to exploit them for writing biographies.

That opportunity is now thrown back several years. While a director of the public libraries might light upon books that had been banned or were not admitted to the open shelves, the secretary *a studiis* came into a close and confidential relation with Caesar. Nowhere specified, the functions of the office were perhaps never defined or restricted. One assumes a kind of superior research assistant, extracting and digesting the documentation the ruler needed for his decisions<sup>73</sup>.

A larger problem now impinges. At a quite early stage the biographies of the six Caesars exhibit a diversity which soon takes the form of a declension. One phenomenon could not fail to stimulate curiosity. Suetonius put to ample employ the letters of Caesar Augustus. He inspected the autographs, he quotes specimens of vocabulary and idiom, he even registers peculiarities of spelling

photograph showing its fragmentary state, see G. B. Townend, *Historia* 10 (1961): facing p. 104.

68 The third line shows him a flamen: probably at Hippo.

69 Followed, e.g., by R. Syme, *Tacitus* (1958) 501; R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (Oxford 1960) 515.

70 T. Haterius Nepos held five posts from 114 until in 119 he acceded to the prefecture of Egypt (ILS 1338).

71 G. B. Townend, *Historia* 10 (1961) 104f. Accepted by Pflaum in *Carrières* III (1961) 968.

72 No previous post is attested. He could not have come straight from the charge of the Vigiles, for that was held by Haterius Nepos (ILS 1338).

73 Gellius III 16, 12: *in eo decreto Hadrianus id statuere se dicit requisitis veterum philosophorum et medicorum sententiis*.



and punctuation. Those letters are also adduced in later biographies – but no quotation from the correspondence of any later ruler<sup>74</sup>.

Hence a clue – and consequent deductions<sup>75</sup>. Writing at Rome, Suetonius finished the first two biographies, which he dedicated to the Prefect of the Guard. In the year 122 supervened his fall from favour and employment. It debarred him from the records and documents he had previously been employing to such good effect. It might have entailed his withdrawal from the capital<sup>76</sup>.

Suetonius' departure with Hadrian in spring or early summer of 121 alters the story and modifies the date. At the same time, it might serve to explain an inability to go on using imperial archives.

### VIII

Twelve Caesars, that is the work declared and potent to posterity. The scope and plan invites scrutiny. Historians sometimes alter their original design. Examples avail from every age. Authors generally feel an impulsion to go back and select an earlier point of inception. Thus Cornelius Tacitus for the enterprise announced in the *Agricola*.

Not so Suetonius. From Julius Caesar to Nero, six Caesars and six books possess a unitary theme. A writer might have stopped with the end of the first dynasty. The chance occurs that such was the original design of Suetonius Tranquillus. If so, the next book (Galba to Vitellius) and the third (the Flavian emperors) are not merely a proper sequel but an afterthought, composed perhaps after a number of years had elapsed<sup>77</sup>. Those six biographies (Galba to Domitian) present a different treatment from what preceded. For the first three at least, the facts dictated: a brief space of time for three ephemeral emperors, and a continuous narration of events in civil war.

In parenthesis, a theory may be noted that reverses the order of composition: the last six biographies preceded the Caesars of the first dynasty<sup>78</sup>. The notion is ingenious. It provokes thought but it fails to convince<sup>79</sup>.

On the other side, a small item deserves attention. The Nero ends with a brief notice: Nero's age at death, his popularity with the Roman plebs – and with the Parthians, who lent vigorous support to an impostor twenty years later when the author was a young man<sup>80</sup>.

74 A. Macé, *op. cit.* 183. 210f.

75 G. B. Townend, *Cl. Quart.* 9 (1959) 286, cf. 288. 293.

76 G. B. Townend, *op. cit.* 286.

77 As conjectured in *Tacitus* (1958) 501, cf. 780.

78 G. W. Bowersock, *Hommages Renard* (Bruxelles 1969) 119ff.

79 Thus, briefly, K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero. A historical commentary*. Coll. Latomus 157 (Bruxelles 1978) 19.

80 *Nero* 57, 2. The notice carries an exaggeration about the impostor – *tam favorable nomen eius apud Parthos fuit ut vehementer adiutus et vix redditus sit*.

The termination is suitable – and effective. One reads on. The first chapter of Galba is resumptive, opening with the words *progenies Caesarum in Nerone defecit*. It proceeds to furnish full elucidation of two omens that foretold in manifest fashion the end of the dynasty. First of all, the laurel trees on Livia's estate near Rome (the villa Ad Gallinas), from which the Caesars took garlands for their triumphs: the whole grove withered away, and the fowls perished also. Then lightning struck the temple of the Caesars, demolishing the statues, severing their heads and knocking away the sceptre held by Augustus.

Cassius Dio, noting Nero's age and the length of his reign, styled him the last of the line and mentioned the first portent. The item marks the end of a book, to judge by the abridgment of Xiphilinus<sup>81</sup>. In the biographies of Suetonius portents heralding the death of a ruler are generally registered towards the end – and these two (he states) occurred in Nero's ultimate year.

A modest conjecture may be permissible. Going on to compose the Galba, the biographer transferred to that book the last chapter of his Nero. If accepted, the conjecture cannot be held to prove that any appreciable interval separated the two books.

## IX

None the less, the topic may be worth pursuing. One line of enquiry offers, to look in the 'Six Caesars' for significant omissions or deliberate postponements. The practices of Tacitus furnish guidance. Embarking on the *Annales*, he read a long way forward. For example, when he registers the provinces assigned to Poppaeus Sabinus in 15, his comment shows him aware that the governor dies in Moesia twenty years later<sup>82</sup>. Further, this author can hold in reserve an item for its most effective exploitation at a later stage. Tiberius Caesar concentrated the cohorts of the Guard in one camp, in 20, according to Cassius Dio: that fact comes up three years later in Tacitus<sup>83</sup>. Again, a great rebellion in Gaul, recounted in Book III at great length and with much detail – but no mention of Druids in a writer not lacking interest in the region or in religious fanaticism anywhere. Compensation was to emerge in Book XVIII with the rising of Julius Vindex, so one may surmise<sup>84</sup>.

Suetonius enounced a technique at an early point in the biography of Augustus. He will operate *singillatim, neque per tempora sed per species* (9). That procedure would not preclude reserving material or persons for treatment later on. On the contrary: Drusus and his son Germanicus to introduce the *Vitae* of Claudius and Caligula respectively.

<sup>81</sup> Dio LXIII 29, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Ann.* I 80, 1, cf. VI 39, 3.

<sup>83</sup> *Ann.* IV 2, 1, cf. Dio LVII 19, 6.

<sup>84</sup> Druids emerged early in 70 (*Hist.* IV 54, 2). For superstition and fanaticism, observe the episode of Mariccus (II 61).

Nevertheless a suspicion arises that some of Suetonius' omissions are due to haste in compilation or to inadvertence. The family circle of Augustus and its extension was relevant. Suetonius left out certain members<sup>85</sup>. Again, the potent friends and ministers. No hint of Vedius Pollio or Sallustius Crispus.

The personal history of the Caesars is the biographer's theme and preoccupation. There is no point in upbraiding him because he says so little about foreign policy. Yet peace and war concern the character of a ruler. Tacitus showed Tiberius Caesar in his last years reacting with energy against a threat from the Parthians. Suetonius by contrast is miserable and misleading<sup>86</sup>.

For present purposes attention may be directed to the Nero, a product that contains an enormous mass of trivial detail about games and spectacles. Nero was a showman, to be sure – but hardly responsible for items of legislation that are also chronicled<sup>87</sup>.

Touching foreign affairs, Suetonius happens to report what can only be regarded as a fable. Nero thought of withdrawing the garrison from Britain and only desisted out of respect for the fame and memory of Claudius (18). That notice occurs in the rubric of creditable or at least not blameworthy features in the ruler (cf. 19, 1).

For the rest, in a lavish biography, two scrappy items about disasters in Britain and in Armenia. However brief, they carry two grave errors<sup>88</sup>. Not a word however about the revolt in Judaea.

Friends and allies occupy a large part in any life that is worth the telling. In this biography Ofonius Tigellinus and Nymphidius Sabinus have no place. With the Caesars, enemies and victims form a standard rubric. Suetonius, a man of letters, does not bother to mention Lucan and Petronius. On his list figures a nobleman, Salvidienus Orfitus, put to death on a trivial charge (37, 1). Domitius Corbulo is nowhere named.

Some of these objections may seem partial and petulant. What then can be said on the other side? Good arguments avail. If Otho is absent from the context of Poppaea Sabina, that is because the full story was to be supplied later on. Similarly, L. Vitellius, a notable figure in the ambiance of Claudius Caesar, was reserved for the biography of his son. Again, the Jewish revolt was deliberately segregated, for all that it deserved a mention among Neronian disasters.

Suetonius furnishes a full account of Nero's last months, days, and hours.

85 Thus Sex. Appuleius (*cos.* 29 B.C.), a nephew, and Paullus Fabius Maximus (11 B.C.), who married a cousin. Of Agrippa the author states *alteram Marcellarum habebat et ex ea liberos* (*Aug.* 63, 1). Which of the two, he fails to specify. She was transferred to Iullus Antonius (*cos.* 10 B.C.) – Iullus nowhere named, despite his role and his fate in the catastrophe of 2 B.C.

86 *Tib.* 41: *rei p. quidem curam usque adeo abiecit ut ... Armeniam a Parthis occupari, Moesiam a Dacis Sarmatisque, Gallias a Germanis vastari neglexerit.*

87 *Nero* 17.

88 *Nero* 39, 1 (cf. 40, 2): *ignominia ad Orientem legionibus in Armenia sub iugum missis aegreque Syria retenta.*

He refers vaguely to the rising in Gaul and names Vindex but there is no mention of Verginius Rufus, the legate of Upper Germany – only an allusion to ‘the defection of the other armies’ (47, 1). Now Verginius is not named in the next biography either.

To sum up. The haste and incompetence of the author render this line of enquiry inconclusive. It cannot be used to support a hypothesis that the prime and original design was confined to the ‘Six Caesars’.

## X

Another approach might be tried. Namely to look for signs indicating that the second series is a continuation, composed a number of years later. A pair have been surmised in the biography of Titus Caesar<sup>89</sup>.

First, Titus was a military tribune on the Rhine and in Britain, earning much credit for *industria* and *modestia*. Suetonius is explicit: *sicut apparet statuarum et imaginum eius multitudine ac titulis per utramque provinciam*<sup>90</sup>. The phrase *sicut apparet* is emphatic, implying autopsy. The testimony derives from somebody or other who had travelled in both regions. It failed to attract attention so long as the belief held that the secretary *ab epistulis* did not accompany his emperor.

Second, the opinion that Titus had been guilty of adultery with Domitia, his brother’s wife. Suetonius adds a comment. She denied it, *persancte iurabat: haud negatura, si qua omnino fuisset, quod illi promptissimum fuit in omnibus probris* (10, 2). The language (both tone and tenses) seems to presuppose that the lady was no longer among the living. Her survival until 126 is attested by consular dates on tiles – and perhaps even into the vicinity of 130<sup>91</sup>.

The consequence is a late dating indeed for the epilogue. Some hesitate to take the interpretation for valid. Domitia Longina (they might contend), Corbulo’s daughter and perhaps descended from the Cassii through her mother, was an arrogant princess. She spent her last years in well-earned seclusion, never having cared what people said – and perhaps not in a position to harm a writer himself now consigned to obscurity.

## XI

Emphasis goes, as is proper, to doubts and uncertainties. First of all, chronology. That touches two writers who overlap. Brief allusion has already been made to the *Annales*, which can hardly help. Nor, it appears, do the poems of

<sup>89</sup> Tacitus (1958) 799f.

<sup>90</sup> Titus 4, 4. Suetonius has *in Germania*. It was Germania Inferior, in 57 or 58, as is inferred from his *castrense contubernium* with Pliny’s uncle (*NH*, praef. 3).

<sup>91</sup> The title *Severo et Arriano cos.* (CIL XV 552) belongs to 129 or 130. The colleague of Flavius Arrianus may be Herennius Severus (*PIR*<sup>2</sup>, H 130) – or perhaps not.



Juvenal, though investigation might be worth the effort. One should be chary of 'influences', given the devious techniques of the satirist. It may be noted in passing that none of his books can be proved anterior to the year 117<sup>92</sup>.

Suetonius, so most now assume, became procurator *a studiis* and *a bibliothecis* before the death of Trajan. Hence early opportunities to examine curious documents, or even an incentive to authorship. The date at which he went on to be secretary *ab epistulis* therefore forfeits importance as it defies ascertainment. It may fall either before or after 119 when Septicius Clarus acquired command of the Praetorian Guard.

Between that year and the mishap in Britain Suetonius dedicated some biographies to Septicius. Perhaps only the first two, it is supposed<sup>93</sup>. Next, the change and the declension observed after Divus Augustus. It is not confined to the neglect of letters written by subsequent rulers. To assign as a reason Suetonius' loss of office was highly plausible<sup>94</sup>. His departure from Rome the year before is now substituted.

Another explanation exercised a certain appeal. Suetonius grew tired of all the labour. Even at the cost of various defects he was in a hurry to finish the task and publish<sup>95</sup>. On the hypothesis promoted in these pages, that original assignation was the 'Six Caesars' only. The sequel may not have come out until some years had elapsed.

Three dates can be taken as firm. That is, the appointment of Septicius Clarus in 119, the journey of the two officials in 121, their demotion in 122. There stands a plain reason for iterating those dates with emphasis. A violent perturbation has recently intervened. Septicius and Turbo, it is argued, did not accede to the Guard until late in 123. Perhaps in 125, when Hadrian returned to Rome<sup>96</sup>. Further, conjoined victims of Hadrian's anger, Septicius and Suetonius did not vacate their posts until 128<sup>97</sup>.

Brief statement will suffice. The *causa mali tanti* was a military diploma dated to August 10 of the year 123<sup>98</sup>. It registered troops in Dacia and Pannonia Inferior who had received their *honesta missio* from Marcius Turbo. The assumption that Turbo was still on the Danube at that time rested upon a misconception<sup>99</sup>.

92 As stated in *Tacitus* (1958) 776, cf. now *AJP* 100 (1978) 260. 277.

93 G. B. Townend, *Cl. Quart.* 9 (1959) 288.

94 G. B. Townend, *op. cit.* 286.

95 A. Macé, *Essai sur Suétone* (1900) 211. In the view of that scholar, Suetonius published all twelve biographies in 121.

96 H.-G. Pflaum, *Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études* 1975/76 (1976) 373f.

97 J. Gascou, *Latomus* 37 (1978) 436ff.

98 *AE* 1973, 459 = M. M. Roxan, *Roman Military Diplomas 1954–1977* (1978), n° 21 (with full bibliography).

99 Not shared by the editor of *Rom. Mil. Dipl.* In *AE* 1973, 459 it had been declared that the diploma necessitated revising the chronology of Turbo's career. – Against the hasty assump-



## XII

From an enquiry in large measure negative, what benefit may be expected to accrue? Various themes or aspects of history and literature come in. In the first place, a scholar's life and vicissitudes. Luck or merit conveys a man a long way in Rome of the Caesars. He who begins as a centurion in the army may acquire equestrian status and go on to govern a province such as Raetia or one of the two Mauretaniae – or better, end with Egypt or the Guard – or with both<sup>100</sup>.

Suetonius had an advantage, a Roman knight to begin with, the father tribune in a legion at the Battle of Bedriacum<sup>101</sup>. If Hippo is the *patria*, this colonial family had managed an early escape from Africa. In Caligula's reign the grandfather is discovered on the Bay of Naples<sup>102</sup>.

Governmental employ beckoned to the ambitious, with education the prime requisite. Suetonius is shown tardy and diffident. It was not until Pliny went out to Bithynia (in 109 or 110) that he was persuaded to leave the shores of Italy. The small word *nunc*, used by the governor in a petition to Trajan, certifies Suetonius as a member of his staff<sup>103</sup>. Going there and returning, Suetonius saw men and cities. Much to inspire an alert student, but depositing no memorial in his writings<sup>104</sup>. The negative sign is valuable. It deters the search for experiences in other countries.

When aged about thirty, Suetonius refused a tribunate in Britain under Neratius Marcellus<sup>105</sup>. After two decades Britain exacted its revenge from a sedentary scholar.

The final post of Suetonius put him in close touch with other knights in the administration. It was also the channel through which some appointments passed<sup>106</sup>. Further, various prospects, if Caesar's favour held. A pair of officials, both from the Greek East, offer for comparison. First, Avidius Heliodorus, who

tion, see remarks in *Guard Prefects of Trajan and Hadrian*, JRS 70 (1980), forthcoming. For a full discussion of relevant military diplomas, G. Alföldy, *Zeitschr. Pap. u. Ep.* 36 (1979) 233ff.

100 Prime specimens are Sulpicius Similis and Marcius Turbo. A centurion in the Jewish War, Velius Rufus reached the governorship of Raetia in the last years of Domitian (ILS 9200: Heliopolis).

101 Suetonius *Otho* 10, 1.

102 *Cal.* 19, 3.

103 In *Epp.* X 94, 1 recent editors adopt Winterfeld's emendation of *nunc* for *tunc* in the mss. For the inference, *Tacitus* (1958) 779 (with minor hesitance expressed in a footnote). Sherwin-White in his commentary (1966), when discussing the career of Suetonius (under I 18), refers to the text as 'ambiguous' but appears to accept and utilise it under X 94, 1. The Bithynian journey was relegated to a footnote by F. Della Corte, *Suetonio eques Romanus*<sup>2</sup> (1967) 21. See now *The Travels of Suetonius Tranquillus*, forthcoming.

104 Unless it be the inscription in Asia honouring Vespasian's father (*Vesp.* 1, 2).

105 *Epp.* III 8.

106 For the duties, Statius *Silvae* V 1, 80ff., including some hand in appointing centurions and equestrian officers (95ff.).

had charge of the *epistulae*, but perhaps only the Greek section. He rose to be Prefect of Egypt before the reign ended<sup>107</sup>. Second Valerius Eudaemon (who may have succeeded Suetonius in the Roman libraries). After a variety of employments that kept him in personal contact with the ruler he had a brush with Hadrian – but emerges under Pius to hold Egypt in succession to Heliodorus<sup>108</sup>.

Suetonius Tranquillus, although seeming isolated, choosing to say little about himself, and barely tangible apart from the correspondence of Pliny, is a recognisable figure in the life of the time. Through Pliny's patronage he abode already on the edge of high society at the capital. One may compare Plutarch, who at an early stage and in another fashion became known to persons of rank, several of them friends of Pliny.

In this well documented epoch a notable dearth of evidence obtains about mutual relations between certain men of letters. Persons missing from Pliny excite a legitimate curiosity. Thus two of his close coevals, Arruntius Stella (*suff.* 101) and Vitorius Marcellus (105), both patrons of Statius and of Martial – and Marcellus was honoured by the dedication of Quintilian's great work.

Literary coteries, although overlapping, tend to be exclusive. Writers and scholars are prone to rivalry or disharmony in any age. That might explain some silences. Only Martial happens to mention Juvenal. For expecting to find him in Pliny's letters, there was in fact no reason. None the less, dislike or criticism of Pliny and his 'circle' has been detected in Juvenal: that is, something more than arises from a satirist's themes and from the persona he adopts<sup>109</sup>.

Disappointments and rancour in Juvenal, the topic is all too familiar and tedious. About Suetonius one may wonder for a moment whether on his demotion ensued a distaste for high society, an estrangement from consular orators and historians. It might be so, yet not easy to elicit from the biographies, unless one were tempted to adduce the total omission of Verginius Rufus and Domitius Corbulo: the one an admired character (and perhaps overvalued by Pliny and Tacitus), the other on high prominence in the *Annales*.

### XIII

It is a seductive pastime to speculate about the motives that induce a man to write history or historical biography, about the season, and about the influence of contemporary events. Some enquiry into Plutarch could not be avoided.

To invoke Plutarch as a predecessor of Suetonius is not of much help. As has been shown, his adaptation of historical narrative does not issue in biogra-

107 Pflaum, *Carrières* 251f.

108 Pflaum, *Carrières* 264ff.

109 G. Highet, *Juvenal the Satirist* (Oxford 1954) 292ff. For some doubts and hesitations, Am. J. Ph. 100 (1979) 255ff.

phy, in the normal meaning of the term, and one cannot with safety appeal to what he might have said about earlier Caesars. For Suetonius, weight should rather be accorded to his previous studies, namely the books *De viris illustribus* – and more perhaps to posts in the Palace and encouragement from amicable patrons.

For all that, the vital challenge and urge to emulation comes from annalistic history. The renaissance of Latin letters in the last age furnishes a curious and instructive parallel. Ammianus wrote in continuation of Tacitus. His proud language proclaims the majesty of the task. History marches along the high places *per negotiorum celsitudines*, it has no truck with *minutiae ignobiles* or the behaviour of *squalidae personae*<sup>110</sup>.

By contrast, the *Historia Augusta*. The author professes to relate *digna memoratu*. In the process he rebuked others for indulging in personal and trivial details when they wrote about emperors. The prime specimen is 'Junius Cordus', whom he invented as a foil and a scapegoat. The performance shows a mocker and a deceiver.

Between Suetonius and the HA, no Latin author of imperial biographies stands on clear and named attestation, apart from Marius Maximus who continued Suetonius with a second sequence of twelve Caesars (Nerva to Elagabalus, the 'ultimus Antoninorum').

Passages in the *Vita Hadriani* declare the propensity of Maximus to scandal and anecdote. Reference has already been made to the dismissal of Septicius and Suetonius, to remarks in detriment of Sabina. Another passage enlarges on Hadrian's ingratitude towards friends and agents, his savage resentments (15, 2–13). The catalogue carries thirteen names. Septicius is there – but not Suetonius. Of Valerius Eudaemon it is alleged *ad egestatem perduxit*. Avidius Heliodorus, however, was merely the object of abuse – *famosissimis litteris laccessivit*<sup>111</sup>.

These and other allegations call for careful scrutiny. Maximus, though not writing in opposition to any known historian (unless it be Cassius Dio), was eager to show up the shady side of the Antonine dynasty. He drew on the gossip that infested high society, malicious as ever, and he did not spare 'good emperors'. Not much could be raked up against Marcus, so he concentrated on Faustina. Fables that the incautious take for history bear the imprint of Marius Maximus.

The inspiration and purpose of the HA becomes clear. The author proposed to continue Maximus and surpass him by composing pure fiction, as demonstrated first in his supplementary biographies of princes and pretenders. As he went on, skill and audacity rose to the peak of talent when he calls himself 'Flavius Vopiscus'.

110 Ammianus XXVI 1, 1 (with pertinent examples); XXVII 2, 1; XXVIII 1, 15.

111 For some of the other names see further JRS 70 (1980), forthcoming.

Historians, he avers, supply *eloquentia* and the *eloquium celsius*, but biographers report the facts, *non tam diserte quam vere*<sup>112</sup>. In support of which claim, six names of the truthful are adduced. First, Suetonius Tranquillus and Marius Maximus, next two fabricated characters, and finally two others who happen to be two of his own previous avatars or masks: 'Julius Capitolinus' and 'Aelius Lampridius'.

Setting himself against history in the grand manner, the impostor had Ammianus in mind, so it may be argued<sup>113</sup>. Analogy has its rights. It permits a surmise about the ambitions and the procedure of Suetonius: opposition not only to annalistic history as such, but to Cornelius Tacitus the consular.

History under the Caesars prolonged for a season the tradition of the Republic. Under the benevolent despotism of Trajan it was in danger of becoming obsolete or undesirable. Tacitus by various devices was able to prevent his senatorial annals from degenerating into a sequence of biographies. Suetonius saw what the public wanted. And so, *in posterum valescit*.

#### XIV

The researches of Suetonius extracted a mass of miscellaneous details, with information not elsewhere discoverable. The prime example is the antecedents of the four emperors who came after Nero. Yet error or inadvertence occurs where the author seems at his best, on family history. Thus Nero's ancestors, or even Nero's aunts<sup>114</sup>.

Phenomena detected in the biographies subsequent to that of Augustus disturb and repel scholars who are enamoured of facts and precision. Suetonius eschews citation of named sources, he generalises from single items, he makes pronouncements about rulers that are shown flimsy or false<sup>115</sup>.

From time to time Suetonius exhibits insight and judgement, it is true. For example, he weighed the motives that impelled Tiberius to break with Augustus and go away to Rhodes; and he insisted on his predilection for Hellenistic literature and abstruse or frivolous erudition<sup>116</sup>.

112 *HA, Prob. 2, 7*. Cf. already 'Trebellius Pollio' in *Trig. tyr. 1, 1*: *non historico nec diserto sed pedestri adloquio*.

113 *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (Oxford 1968) 94ff.; *The Historia Augusta. A Call for Clarity* (1971) 25ff. Not all have accepted this thesis, one should add.

114 Suetonius commits errors about the consuls of 96 B.C. and A.D. 32 (*Nero 2, 1; 5, 2*); and, after three times naming Domitia Lepida (5, 2; 6, 3; 7, 1), the last time for a report of Nero's base ingratitude, the biographer relates how he accelerated the death of an anonymous aunt (34, 5). That is, Domitia the wife of Passienus Crispus (*PIR*<sup>2</sup>, D 171). – The Index to the Loeb edition (1914) in consequence assumed only one aunt.

115 As specified by G. B. Townend, *Cl. Quart.* 9 (1959) 288ff.

116 *Tib.* 10. 70.



Favourable verdicts on Suetonius' general performance are pronounced – and can be admitted, up to a point. Suetonius deserves credit as an original and independent writer; and there is more artistry in the composition than had previously been discerned or allowed<sup>117</sup>.

A danger ensues of overvaluation, especially if Suetonius be extolled as a historian as well as an author<sup>118</sup>. It has therefore been expedient to single out some of the inadequacies<sup>119</sup>.

In the collecting of facts, as of words or names, error is a normal hazard, to be cheerfully faced by author or by critic. If undue haste is suspected in some sections of Suetonius' work, curiosity might be drawn to the methods of composition. To Suetonius as to Plutarch there is no reason to deny secretarial aid. It can also be invoked to explain a peculiar feature in the earlier biographies of the *Historia Augusta*, namely rough and incompetent abridgement of the basic source<sup>120</sup>. The author himself had superior interests.

On the lowest count Suetonius is a repository of facts. A perceptive approach should ask about his opinions. If the exposition is objective on the surface, the author has decided views about emperors good and bad. Instructive perhaps, but in no way surprising. About government and society a general consensus obtained in the educated class now that the imperial system had endured for close on a century and a half since the War of Actium. It could be postulated even were it not manifest in the pages of Tacitus and Pliny<sup>121</sup>.

Suetonius is no exception. And not a revelation either. He cannot be made to disclose a set of beliefs peculiar to the equestrian order<sup>122</sup>.

The author is reticent and unobtrusive. Slight prospect therefore of discovering significant traces of his origin or his experiences. One attempt came to nothing. The sixth line of the fragmentary inscription at Hippo supplied a fact of some interest. Suetonius had been a *pontifex Vulcani*. Where he held that priesthood was a question. This *pontifex* is on clear and public attestation at Ostia. Hence speculation about a connection – and perhaps services rendered to that grateful city<sup>123</sup>. Or again, the singular fitness of antiquarian studies com-

117 See the influential study of W. Steidle, *Sueton und die antike Biographie* (München 1951). For criticism, A. Dihle, *Gött. gel. Anzeigen* 1954, 48ff.

118 Against which, K. Bringmann, *Rh. Mus.* 114 (1971) 268ff. (on the *Tiberius*); D. Flach, *Gymnasium* 99 (1972) 273ff. The latter scholar concludes 'kein geglücktes Experiment' (288).

119 Few critics have drawn attention to the omissions.

120 For this thesis, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (1968) 182f.; *Hist. Aug. Coll.* 1966/67 (1968) 152f. = *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971) 28. It ought not to have misled. None the less, one critic took the modest hypothesis as tantamount to 'plural authorship' of the *HA*.

121 By the same token, the opinions about senate and emperors to be surmised in Marius Maximus and discovered in the *HA* are no surprise.

122 Della Corte spread himself on 'la mentalità del ceto equestre' (op. cit. 165ff.). Against, J. Gasco, *Rev. ét. lat.* 54 (1976) 257ff.

123 F. Grosso, *Rend. Acc. Lincei* 14 (1959) 265ff.; R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (1960) 515f. (much more circumspect).



bined with a priesthood in a town of Latium – and comparable to Plutarch's activities at Delphi<sup>124</sup>.

An inscription at Ostia overthrew the construction. One of the local magnates became *pontifex Vulcani* in the year 105<sup>125</sup>. He was still among the living, it now emerges, in 126<sup>126</sup>.

An engaging topic subsists. Although, as has been shown, the biographies refuse to yield even a hint of previous experiences, such as the journey to Bithynia, the removal from high office might have left its mark.

## XV

Suetonius lacks interest in the larger themes of imperial policy, and his neglect of foreign affairs is shown detrimental both in the Tiberius and the Nero. Trajan's conquest of Dacia and the onslaught on Parthia leave no visible impact. As concerns Trajan's successor, events and policy in the early years of his reign have been submitted to careful scrutiny: Suetonius' presentation of earlier rulers might betray covert criticism, or at the lowest some failing in tact or discretion. The new emperor was vulnerable on three counts. On short statement, as follows<sup>127</sup>.

First, the suspect adoption at Selinus, the role of Plotina, and Trajan's death kept concealed for several days<sup>128</sup>. Recounting the end of Claudius Caesar, the biographer states *mors eius celata est donec circa successorem omnia ordinarentur* (44, 2). The item should not be taken as an attack against Hadrian. Still, the biographer is by no means as careful as previously<sup>129</sup>.

Second, the execution of the four consulars, the friends and marshals of Trajan, for treason neither proved nor plausible. Suetonius records how Titus suppressed Caecina Alienus. He adds a damaging comment: *ad praesens plurimum contraxit invidiae, ut non temere quis tam adverso rumore magisque invitis omnibus transierit ad principatum* (6, 1). In view of Hadrian's predicament and unpopularity, more unfortunate words could hardly have been chosen<sup>130</sup>.

Indeed, Titus can contribute something more. The public gave voice to ominous forebodings: *denique propalam alium Neronem et opinabantur et prae-*

124 S. Mazzarino, *Il pensiero storico classico* II 2 (1966) 150ff. He speaks of the 'forma mentale' of the priest (156) and concludes by comparing the 'sacerdote laziale' and the 'sacerdote di Delfi' (159).

125 *Fasti Ost.* XIX.

126 F. Zevi, *Mél. Arch. Hist. Ec. fr. Rome* 82 (1970) 301. For the consequences, *ibid.* 302f.; R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*<sup>2</sup> (1973) 583f.

127 G. B. Townend, *op. cit.* 290ff. (a statement fully and clearly argued).

128 Dio LXIX 1, 3; *HA, Hadr.* 4, 10.

129 Townend, *op. cit.* 291: 'it is no longer the language of a loyal court official anxious not to offend a captious master'. He adduced by contrast Suetonius on the death of Augustus (*Aug.* 98, 5; *Tib.* 21, 1). 130 Townend, *op. cit.* 292.

*dicabant* (7, 1). In the philhellene Hadrian the *prudentes* at Rome had reasons for discerning Nero come again – not merely malice but on a sober estimate<sup>131</sup>.

Third, Hadrian's abandonment of Trajan's conquests beyond the Euphrates. Of Nero it is stated *augendi propagandique imperii neque voluntate ulla neque spe motus unquam, etiam ex Britannia deducere exercitum cogitavit* (18). The notion that Nero thought of giving up Britain is clearly a fable. It reflects gossip or rumour early in the reign of Hadrian, perhaps inspired by military disasters, hence more relevant to Hadrian than to Nero<sup>132</sup>.

In the recent time the report has been the subject of inordinate debate – and some take it seriously<sup>133</sup>. In the present context what matters is the implication, namely an emperor's plain duty to extend the imperial dominion. From the outset the successor of Trajan declared a contrary policy.

Minor items can be adduced that would not have been at all to his liking – yet hardly to be avoided when a biographer was writing about deleterious rulers. One scholar, however, assumes personal antipathy and a harsh indictment all through<sup>134</sup>.

Without initial disharmony, literature and learning can be a source of estrangement and exacerbation. For example, Suetonius insists that Augustus favoured a plain style, condemning preciousness and archaism (86, 1–3). Hadrian betrayed or avowed those predilections.

A familiar rubric, alluded to above, exhibits the imperial polymath ungrateful towards his friends and notably at odds with intellectuals, the consequences being drastic and deplorable for some rivals. Tranquil inspection and a thought for the biographer Marius Maximus will abate or disallow some of the atrocities<sup>135</sup>.

The dismissal of Septicius and Suetonius involves Vibia Sabina, with remarks to her detriment. Pretentious and arrogant she may have been. Who can tell? No extant writer speaks in her favour or defence.

By some *error* the two officials fell victim to *Caesaris ira* – but ultimately to his predilection for men of letters. Perhaps a bad choice to begin with<sup>136</sup>. Travel reveals the truth about people and sharpens annoyances, even without a summer in northern England.

131 Thus *Tacitus* (1958) 519 (summing up the false Neros).

132 As assumed in *Tacitus* (1958) 490.

133 It has not failed to stimulate local zeal. For the copious bibliography and a full and careful discussion cf. K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero* (1978) 110ff. He concludes that 'the withdrawal plan was apparently debated in the winter of 54/5, perhaps advocated by Seneca and Burrus'.

134 T. F. Carney, *Proc. Afr. Class. Ass.* 2 (1968) 7ff. That scholar goes as far as the term 'mutual antipathy' (23).

135 JRS 70 (1980), forthcoming. For Heliodorus and Eudaemon (and also Favorinus), see G. W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1969) 50ff.

136 As suggested in *The Travels of Suetonius Tranquillus*, forthcoming.