

**Zeitschrift:** Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique  
**Herausgeber:** Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'Antiquité classique  
**Band:** 44 (1998)

**Artikel:** Vita Caesarum : remembering and forgetting the past  
**Autor:** Bowersock, G.W.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-660870>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 24.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## VII

G.W. BOWERSOCK

### VITA CAESARUM

### REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING THE PAST

Но те, которым в дружной встрече  
Я строфы первые читал ...  
Иных уж нет, а те далече,  
Как Сади некогда сказал.  
(Pushkin)

Although the literature of antiquity includes biographies of individual kings and generals, there is no trace whatever of sequential, linked biographies of dynastic rulers before the Roman principate. Individual rulers had, of course, been the subject of biographies. In Greek Xenophon had set an example of encomiastic biography in his account of Agesilaos of Sparta, and Nicolaus of Damascus did something similar for Augustus, also in Greek, even before the emperor's death<sup>1</sup>. In Latin Cornelius Nepos had recounted the lives of many eminent generals and rulers in his work on foreign leaders. His preface shows a beguiling taste for cultural relativism — why Greeks do things that Romans would not, and why Romans do things that Greeks would not<sup>2</sup>. Nepos openly acknowledged that the whole exercise to which he was devoting himself seemed a *genus*

<sup>1</sup> For the substantial fragments of the βίος Καίσαρος of Nicolaus, see *FGrHist* 90 F 125-130.

<sup>2</sup> See the preface to the *De excellentibus ducibus exterarum gentium*: for example, *neque enim Cimoni fuit turpe, Atheniensium summo viro, sororem germanam habere in matrimonio, quippe cum cives eius eodem uterentur instituto. at id quidem nostris moribus nefas habetur* (4).

*scripturae leve*, but, as Horsfall has recently pointed out, biographical writing was not uncommon at the time and Nepos' writings take their place among many examples of the genre in the late Roman republic<sup>3</sup>. Most instances were connected with promoting the reputations of statesman or intellectuals. But none was part of a sequential series of ruler lives.

An enigmatic papyrus fragment in Copenhagen (*PHaun. 6*), originally published as a scrap from *ein wirkliches Geschichtswerk*, has been claimed subsequently to be an important excerpt from a set of Hellenistic thumbnail biographies of the Ptolemies<sup>4</sup>. Mario Segre thought that it was an annotated genealogy, but more recently Italo Gallo has argued with considerable plausibility that the fragment contains bits from an Alexandrian list (*pinax*) of members of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Kings and queens appear there, each under their own separate rubric, with summary historical information about them. Such a Hellenistic prosopography of the Ptolemies, if that it is what it really is, cannot conceivably be seen as linked biographies of kings. The compass of the entries is too slight, and many more personalities than the rulers themselves are included. The Copenhagen papyrus does not get much beyond a routine register.

Hence it may be said that in the late first and early second centuries A.D. two nearly contemporary writers, Plutarch and Suetonius, embarked, without warning or antecedent, upon separate works of sequential lives, one in Greek and one in

<sup>3</sup> N. HORSFALL (ed.), *Cornelius Nepos. A Selection* (Oxford 1989), 10-11. On Nepos see also J. GEIGER, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*, *Historia*, Einzelschr. 47 (Stuttgart 1985).

<sup>4</sup> *Papyri Graecae Haunienses Instituti Papyrologiae Graecae Universitatis Hauniensis cura Carsten Höeg editae*, I, ed. T. LARSEN (Copenhagen 1942), no. 6. For subsequent discussion, M. SEGRE, "Una genealogia dei Tolemei e le 'imagines maiorum' dei Romani", in *Rend. Pont. Acc. Rom. di Archeol.* 19 (1942-43), 269-80. The fundamental treatment is I. GALLO (ed.), "Pinax biografico dei Tolemei (*P. Haun. 6*)", in *Frammenti biografici da papiri I* (Roma 1975), 57-105. See also A. MOMIGLIANO, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, Mass. 2<sup>nd</sup> 1993), 115. For readings in the text, see C. HABICHT, "Bemerkungen zum *P. Haun. 6*", in *ZPE* 39 (1980), 1-5, reprinted in the same scholar's *Athen in hellenistischer Zeit* (München 1994), 47-51.

Latin. The genre of the *vita Caesarum* was born suddenly and inexplicably, and its two progenitors showed no sign of mutual influence or regard. Since the linked *Herrscherviten* took shape relatively late, historians of literature and culture must naturally wonder what circumstances could have brought them forth. They must wonder no less why, of the two forms of imperial biographies, the Greek died with its creator, while the Latin had continuators and imitators for some three centuries afterwards. There had certainly been ruling dynasties before Augustus, but, as we have seen, no one had thought to assemble biographies of their rulers one after another. Obviously something must have moved Plutarch and Suetonius to invent the *vita Caesarum* when they did. Something must also have moved them to elect such very different ways of doing their work. Finally, something must have made the Suetonian form so popular in the following centuries, while leaving the Plutarchean form utterly without successors. These are fundamental problems in achieving an understanding of imperial biography.

The genesis of lives of the Caesars has curiously not been a subject that has engaged the interest of many readers, even those for whom Plutarch and Suetonius have been central authors. In his vast and valuable essay on Plutarch in Pauly-Wissowa Konrat Ziegler had nothing to offer on his subject's imperial biographies<sup>5</sup>, and few writers on Suetonius are more forthcoming on this issue. For such scholars the only point of contact between the Greek and the Roman writers was their common source in the lives of Galba and Otho — since those are the only two lives from Plutarch's series that happen to survive. There are, to be sure, notable exceptions to this tale of neglect: C.P. Jones, who devoted an entire chapter of his *Plutarch and Rome* in 1971 to the Greek *vita Caesarum*<sup>6</sup>; Joseph Geiger in an important paper

<sup>5</sup> K. ZIEGLER, "Plutarchos", in *RE* XXI 1 (1951), 895.

<sup>6</sup> C.P. JONES, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971), 72-80 ("The Lives of the Caesars"). I am most grateful to the author of that book for valuable comment on this paper.

of 1975 on the image of Julius Caesar in the Roman Empire<sup>7</sup>; and Ronald Syme, who addressed the origins of linked imperial lives in a paper of 1980 entitled "Biographers of the Caesars"<sup>8</sup>. These discussions delineated some of the basic arguments, but much remains to be said.

It is generally conceded that Plutarch took up imperial biography before Suetonius, whose extant lives are known to have been dedicated to the early Hadrianic prefect of the Praetorian Guard, C. Septicius Clarus<sup>9</sup>. Suetonius' experience in writing biographies of rhetors and grammarians doubtless trained him in the problems of disentangling the complex web of a human life, but it cannot have helped him much with the substance of administration and policy across a huge empire. Plutarch had probably had no experience of biography at all before he undertook to write his *Caesars*. The sophisticated manner of the *Parallel Lives* points clearly, as Friedrich Leo observed nearly a century ago, to a later date than *die unausgebildete Form des Buches über Galba und Otho*<sup>10</sup>. In fact, Plutarch seems to have been an innovator twice over, first in creating linked imperial biographies and then again in creating the concept of paired biographies of comparable Greeks and Romans. His background in rhetoric, perhaps reflected in a few of his more obviously juvenile pieces (such as the *De fortuna Alexandri*), might have helped a little in composing the imperial biographies, but the writing of history would have helped more. Plutarch had had no experience of that and was therefore obliged to excerpt generously from histories available to him. Syme, echoing Leo, characterized Plutarch's method in the imperial lives rather too crudely when he wrote, "Plutarch sliced up narrative history"<sup>11</sup>. Plutarch added important obser-

<sup>7</sup> J. GEIGER, "Zum Bild Julius Caesars in der römischen Kaiserzeit", in *Historia* 24 (1975), 444-453.

<sup>8</sup> R. SYME, "Biographers of the Caesars", in *MH* 37 (1980), 104-128.

<sup>9</sup> LYD. *mag.* 2, 6.

<sup>10</sup> F. LEO, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form* (Leipzig 1901), 156.

<sup>11</sup> R. SYME, *art. cit.*, 105.

vations and perspectives of his own, but overall the assessment is not too wide of the mark.

The reasons for Plutarch's pioneering innovation will always remain elusive unless we can determine a time of composition for his imperial biographies. The catalogue of Lamprias tells us only that they began with Augustus and ended with Vitellius. But that is precious knowledge. For Suetonius the first Caesar was Caesar, and so he was even for Plutarch when he wrote the *Parallel Lives*: in his biography of Numa (19,6) he describes the month of Augustus as named for the second Roman emperor — ἀπὸ τοῦ δευτέρου μὲν ἄρξαντος, Σεβαστοῦ δὲ ἐπικληθέντος. Although Leo canvassed the possibility that Plutarch chose to begin his imperial lives with Augustus because he had already written the paired biographies of Alexander and Caesar<sup>12</sup>, no one has seriously countenanced such a solution, and it is manifestly incompatible with Leo's own judgment on the *Parallel Lives*.

What, then, do we make of Plutarch's leading off his imperial biographies with Augustus? At some point in the reign of Trajan, before Plutarch's *Numa* and Suetonius' *De vita Caesarum*, Julius Caesar had become entrenched as the first Roman emperor. A new commemorative issue of Trajanic coins assigned to the year 107 celebrated Caesar<sup>13</sup>. As general and conqueror, he furnished an important model for Trajan himself (along with Caesar's own model, Alexander). There is no way of telling how long before 107 the installation of the dictator as the first emperor had occurred, but in view of Trajan's partiality for him it is likely to have happened early in the reign. Recognizing this constraint and persuaded that Plutarch could not pos-

<sup>12</sup> F. LEO, *loc. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> See J. GEIGER, *art. cit.* (n. 7), 450. This numismatic evidence was invoked nearly thirty years ago in connection with Suetonius by the present writer in "Suetonius and Trajan", in *Hommages à Marcel Renard I*, Collection Latomus 101 (Bruxelles 1969), 119-125. The argument advanced there in favor of Suetonius' writing the last six of his biographies of the Caesars before the first six has not found much favor. Perhaps rightly. See K.R. BRADLEY, *Suetonius' Life of Nero. A Historical Commentary*, Collection Latomus 157 (Bruxelles 1978), 19.

sibly have written under Domitian, Geiger struggled to insert the Greek imperial lives into the brief reign of Nerva. This is a measure of despair and carries little conviction.

Yet a firm disinclination to see Plutarch at work on the project under Domitian also controlled Syme's interpretation of the lives. He had started his investigation with exactly the right preamble: "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 dawn upon Plutarch?"<sup>14</sup> But he steadfastly refused to consider, as Jones had bravely done, the possibility of composition in the reign of Domitian. The example of Tacitus' silence in that period weighed perhaps too heavily with Syme. It seemed inconceivable that a person so honorable as Plutarch could have written at such a time. "The hazards under Domitian", wrote Syme, "were obvious to a man of mature years and judgement such as Plutarch ... Senators had to be careful. Even a Greek scholar got into trouble. Hermogenes of Tarsus was put to death by Domitian *ob quasdam in historia figuras*"<sup>15</sup>.

But Plutarch was no Tacitus: he was a decade or so older than the consular historian, and he was no senator<sup>16</sup>. He was indeed mature under Domitian, so mature that it is hard to credit that so prolific a writer waited until he was well over fifty years old before writing anything of substance. (Rhetorical exercises hardly matter in appraising Plutarch's oeuvre as a whole.) The obscure Hermogenes, who is not the famous Antonine rhetor of Tarsus, did indeed run into trouble<sup>17</sup>, but the undeniably dangerous time lasted only from 93 until the emperor's death. It was in that murderous season that Hermogenes presumably perished along with many others. The year 93 saw the deaths of Arulenus Rusticus, Herennius Senecio,

<sup>14</sup> R. SYME, *art. cit.*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> R. SYME, *art. cit.*, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Tacitus was born in 56 or 57 (praetor in 88, consul in 97), Plutarch, it seems, in the mid or early forties (cf. C.P. JONES, *op. cit.*, 135).

<sup>17</sup> SUET. *Dom.* 10, 1.

and the younger Helvidius Priscus, to say nothing of the exile of Junius Mauricus, but before that time many writers of mature years were incontrovertibly disseminating their works. One has only to think of Statius, Martial, Valerius Flaccus, Silius Italicus, and Quintilian. It would be wrong to impose Tacitus' self-imposed silence upon others.

It is time to reconsider and develop Jones' case for placing Plutarch's imperial biographies in the age of Domitian. The consequences for the future of the genre of *Herrscherviten* would be significant. Since Plutarch's opening with Augustus forces us back, on any hypothesis, to a time no later than the beginning of the reign of Trajan, there ought to be very compelling reasons for squeezing the lives into the brief frame provided by Nerva. On the contrary, there are powerful arguments for going back to Domitian, to the period between his accession in 81 and the dramatic turn for the worse in 93.

The biography of Otho that survives from Plutarch's *De vita Caesarum* provides explicit testimony for Plutarch's presence in north Italy under the Flavians. In the company of his consular friend, Mestrius Florus, he toured the battlefield between Bedriacum and Cremona, and he viewed Otho's tomb at Brixellum<sup>18</sup>. Plutarch's eminent host was undoubtedly the person from whom he received the Roman citizenship and acquired his Roman name of Mestrius Plutarchus. It is a reasonable inference from his name that Mestrius' family was Transpadane<sup>19</sup>. Plutarch was therefore probably on a visit to the home territory of his patron. Another passage in the *Otho* conveys an indefensibly favorable opinion of the city of Placentia ("famous and more flourishing than any other in Italy")<sup>20</sup>. Perhaps Mestrius gave Plutarch a particularly good tour of the city. Perhaps he even came from there. In any case, Plutarch's visit to north Italy

<sup>18</sup> PLUT. *Otho* 14, 1 (ἐμοὶ δὲ ὕστερον ὄδούντι διὰ τοῦ πεδίου Μέστριος Φλωῶρος ἀνὴρ ὑπατικός ...) and 18, 1 (Brixellum).

<sup>19</sup> R. SYME, *art. cit.*, 105 n. 10. For Plutarch's Roman *gentilicium*, SIG<sup>3</sup> 829 (Delphi), cf. 844.

<sup>20</sup> PLUT. *Otho* 6, 2.

stands not so much as an incitement to write imperial lives, as Santo Mazzarino rather improbably suggested<sup>21</sup>: the careers of Galba and Otho were but a tiny part of the whole project. But the visit proves Plutarch's association with an important Flavian senator. Mestrius Florus in particular enjoyed the support of Domitian and moved to the proconsulate of Asia in about 87<sup>22</sup>.

The date of the north Italian tour cannot be ascertained with certainty, although the implication in Plutarch's text that Mestrius was a consular at that time would appear to put it sometime after his consulate in 75. Plutarch also enjoyed the friendship of the Avidii brothers, Quietus and Nigrinus, both of whom prospered under Domitian<sup>23</sup>. Quietus even held his consulate in the terrible year 93. Plutarch reports that he conversed with Quietus about his governorship of Achaëa, where Plutarch lived, and that occurred in about 91/2. He may have met the Avidii in Italy through Mestrius or others. In January of 89 Plutarch seems to have been in Rome when a rumor reached the capital that the usurper Antonius Saturninus had been defeated<sup>24</sup>. We know, by his own account, that he delivered a lecture in the presence of Arulenus Rusticus<sup>25</sup>, whose consulate in 92 came on the eve of his destruction by the emperor in the following year. The incident recorded by Plutarch implies growing tension with the imperial government, since a soldier delivered a letter to Rusticus from the emperor while Plutarch was actually speaking, but Rusticus dramatically refused to read it while the lecture was in progress. Had Rusticus not been martyred but sat out the reign, his rep-

<sup>21</sup> S. MAZZARINO, *Il pensiero storico classico* II 1 (Bari 1966), 146.

<sup>22</sup> B.E. THOMASSON, *Laterculi Praesidum* I (Göteborg 1984), cols. 217-8; cf. R. SYME, *art. cit.*, 106.

<sup>23</sup> On the Avidii, G.W. BOWERSOCK, "Plutarch and the Sublime Hymn of Ofellius Laetus", in *GRBS* 23 (1982), 278, reprinted in ID., *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire* (Goldbach 1994), 64. See also ID., "Tacitus and the Province of Asia", in *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition*, ed. by T.J. LUCE and A.J. WOODMAN (Princeton 1993), 9.

<sup>24</sup> PLUT. *Aem.* 25.

<sup>25</sup> PLUT. *De curios.* 15 = *Mor.* 522 D-E. Cf. C.P. JONES, *op. cit.*, 23.

utation would have been very different. Up until 93 he wrote, lectured, and pursued his political career within the government of Domitian. Why should not Plutarch have led an equally active life in those days? Syme suggested the attractive possibility that Mestrius may have brought Plutarch back with him to Italy upon returning from his proconsulate in Asia<sup>26</sup>. It would be irrelevant whether the tour of north Italy occurred on his visit in the late eighties or on some earlier visit.

We find Plutarch in a cultivated, philhellenic Domitianic environment. Although the closing of his *De vita Caesarum* with Vitellius need not necessarily imply that the Flavians were still in power, that would be the most natural inference. Syme thought that Plutarch would have avoided writing about the Flavians under Nerva and Trajan to avoid giving offence<sup>27</sup>. But no such scruple seems to have inhibited Tacitus, Juvenal, Pliny, and Suetonius. The two lives that survive from Plutarch's imperial biographies provide valuable indications of composition in a cultivated Domitianic milieu, although not all are equally decisive. When Plutarch in the *Galba* describes Junius Mauricus as being, in both reputation and in fact, one of the best men in Rome<sup>28</sup>, he obviously cannot have been writing during the exile of Mauricus between 93 and 96. But he could have been writing, as Jones pointed out, before 93, or, as Geiger argues, after 96<sup>29</sup>.

More help comes in the *Galba*. Plutarch naturally dilates on the famous and ambiguous role of Verginius Rufus in his relation to Vindex. He concludes by observing that Verginius was spared the vexations of other contenders of the time and passed into "an untroubled life and old age full of peace and quiet" (εἰς βίον ἀκύμονα καὶ γῆρας εἰρήνης καὶ ἡσυχίας μεστόν)<sup>30</sup>. In 97 Verginius was to serve as consul again for the third time,

<sup>26</sup> R. SYME, *art. cit.*, 106.

<sup>27</sup> R. SYME, *art. cit.*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> PLUT. *Galba* 8, 5.

<sup>29</sup> C.P. JONES, *op. cit.*, 72-73; J. GEIGER, *art. cit.* (n. 7), 445.

<sup>30</sup> PLUT. *Galba* 10, 4.

and he was invited by Nerva to sit on a fiscal committee. Later that same year Verginius Rufus died. Plutarch's words leave little room for doubt that the final year of Verginius' life, consumed with highly visible public service, had not yet occurred. Hence he was writing before 97.

But if there were even a hint of doubt about this interpretation, it would be removed by another remark from the surviving imperial lives. In the *Life of Otho* Plutarch inevitably brings in Caecina Alienus, the general of Vitellius. Titus' brutal suppression of this man, whom he had once befriended, later became a stunning example of betrayal, and it appears as such in Suetonius' *Life of Titus*, whose reign began with this ill-omened execution of an undeserving man<sup>31</sup>. Plutarch provides what can only be the official Flavian position: Caecina was offensive and vulgar, hardly resembling a Roman citizen, with a wife who rode a horse<sup>32</sup>. It will not do to excuse this description of Caecina as borrowed from some source written between the accession of Titus and the fall of Domitian. Plutarch would later, like Suetonius, have been perfectly well aware of the facts — and of Caecina's rehabilitation.

We have, therefore, every reason to locate the invention of imperial biography in the reign of Domitian before the year 93. The Flavians had exerted themselves mightily to establish a legitimate place in succession to their predecessors, as the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani* (ILS 244) makes abundantly plain through its numerous citations of precedents laid down by earlier emperors. The first of these emperors is, without exception, Augustus. Similarly, in the oath of allegiance administered to soldiers and citizens throughout the Flavian age, the first emperor whose *acta* are named is consistently Augustus<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> SUET. *Tit.* 6, 2: *In his Aulum Caecinam consularem vocatum ad cenam ac vixdum triclinio egressum confodi iussit... Quibus rebus sicut in posterum securitati satis cavit, ita ad praesens plurimum contraxit invidiae, ut non temere quis tam adverso rumore magisque invitis omnibus transierit ad principatum.*

<sup>32</sup> PLUT. *Otho* 6, 3.

<sup>33</sup> On the oath, see J. GEIGER, *art. cit.* (n. 7), 451-2.

Plutarch's lives would fit perfectly into the context of this legitimizing backward look at prior reigns. Domitian's decision to celebrate the Secular Games in 88, by reference to the Augustan — not Claudian — calculation of the *saeculum*, might have provided the occasion for a reaffirmation of the roots of his monarchy in the Augustan age. Plutarch's story about the news of the defeat of Saturninus in January of 89 would allow us to place him in Rome just before that, therefore precisely in the year of the Games. We can only surmise that the concept of *vita Caesarum* was born exactly at that time, but we can be confident that it was born in that general period and context.

It is odd that Syme, who once described Domitian, in the first article he ever published, as “this able and intelligent emperor”<sup>34</sup>, should have so resisted the cumulative evidence for active participation in the regime on the part of major intellectual figures down to the beginning of the terror in 93. No one can know that tyranny is coming until it has arrived, and human ambition tends to prefer working with what there is. Plutarch and Tacitus were both human in this way, since both prospered in the reign of Domitian. Tacitus did very well indeed politically, as he candidly admitted in the opening of his *Histories*. If he could boast of not writing when his career was moving along so successfully, that may have been because he was still young. Only after his consulate in 97 could he become the consular historian that Syme so much admired. When Tacitus held his praetorship in the year of Domitian's Secular Games, he was just over thirty years old. By contrast, at that time Plutarch was in his middle to late forties.

In the era *ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*, when Tacitus began his *Histories* (1, 1, 4), Plutarch turned to a new kind of biography — his second attempt at the genre. In devising the concept of parallel lives of great Greeks and

<sup>34</sup> R. SYME, “The Imperial Finances under Domitian, Nerva, and Trajan”, in *JRS* 20 (1930), 55, reprinted in *Roman Papers* I, ed. by E. BADIEN (Oxford 1979), 1. It is clear from letters in the Syme archive in Wolfson College, Oxford, that Syme was thinking at this time of writing a book on Domitian.

Romans he not only proclaimed the achievements of the two cultures over which Rome presided, he moved as far as possible away from the biographical form of the *vita Caesarum*. That had been confined to Romans of the last hundred years, and Plutarch had written his lives as a kind of continuous history broken into segments by the successive reigns. This emerges clearly in the transition from the end of the *Galba* to the opening of the *Otho*. The story runs on seamlessly without any introduction of Otho and his family at that point. This is the sliced up narrative, as Syme described it. By contrast, Plutarch's new enterprise not only enlarged the chronological frame by hundreds of additional years and embraced Greeks on equal terms with Romans. It explicitly repudiated the conjunction of biography and history. In his often cited preface to the *Alexander* (1, 2) Plutarch declared he was writing lives, not history (οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους), and he emphasized that the delineation of character, as revealed in insignificant detail, would often be more important than battles and deeds. Plutarch turned his back on what he accomplished in his *De vita Caesarum*.

This is hardly surprising. If the imperial lives were a product of Domitianic culture and a reflection of the Flavian view of the past, Plutarch, no less than Tacitus, Pliny, and many others, would have done their utmost to distance themselves from their earlier careers. The bracing era of Nerva and Trajan was full of persons who had made their way to that felicity by way of Domitian. Some, of course, had perished like Arulenus Rusticus, other had spent years away in exile like Mauricus. But before the axe fell, even those two paragons of integrity had done perfectly well under Domitian. Mauricus' witty dinner-table quip, recorded by Pliny, shows that he fully understood the situation. When Nerva inquired what would have become of the vicious informer Catullus Messallinus had he survived, Mauricus promptly responded that he would be there dining with them<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> PLIN. *epist.* 4, 22, 5-6.

But everyone now sought a new way, and Plutarch found his in the brilliant idea of parallel lives. His lives of the Caesars were not something that he or anyone else would have wished to continue or to imitate.

The general repudiation of Domitianic literary taste after 96 can be observed in many genres. Virgil, so much admired by Silius Italicus that he formally commemorated the poet's birthday each year<sup>36</sup>, slipped into disfavor. Hadrian famously preferred Ennius<sup>37</sup>. Epic poetry, after the achievements of both Silius and Valerius Flaccus, stops dead in the Latin tradition. It survives only in Greek after Domitian. Horace, who had inspired Statius to extravagant virtuosity in lyric metres, suddenly disappears as a model for new generations of poets. Only Martial, master of the witty and indelicate epigram, manages to bridge the gap, but not for long. The Latin epigram is soon swamped by the thunderous satire of Juvenal, for whom Domitian and his crew provided ideal targets. It is no wonder that Plutarch turned to something different.

The genre of *Herrscherviten* was accordingly left to be discovered a second time and in a different form. The *De vita Caesarum* of Suetonius owed nothing to Plutarch's work on the emperors from Augustus to Vitellius. Most importantly Suetonius, mirroring the ideology of the new age, began with Julius Caesar. But he shared Plutarch's post-Domitianic conviction that biography should illustrate character and not shrink from trivial but revealing detail. To achieve this objective Suetonius renounced chronological narrative (*per tempora*) in favor of proceeding by topics (*per species*)<sup>38</sup>. This procedure highlighted the personality of the Caesars, exposing weaknesses and excesses of the court as never before in serious prose. (Such

<sup>36</sup> PLIN. *epist.* 3, 7, 8: *Multum ubique librorum, multum statuarum, multum imaginum, quas non habebat modo, verum etiam venerabatur, Vergili ante omnes, cuius natalem religiosius quam suum celebrabat, Neapoli maxime, ubi monumentum eius adire ut templum solebat.*

<sup>37</sup> HIST. AUG. *Hadr.* 16, 6, a credible item in one of the better lives of the Augustan History.

<sup>38</sup> SUET. *Aug.* 9.

things had, of course, surfaced in polemical epigrams.) During Suetonius' tenure as *ab epistulis* of the emperor he must have had access to precious archival documents, which might even have provided the impetus for his great undertaking<sup>39</sup>. The dedication of the Suetonian lives to Septicius Clarus as guard prefect would appear to ensure that the work was completed between 119 and 122, when Septicius was in that post. In all probability Suetonius was writing at the same time as Tacitus was at work on his *Annals* and covering much of the same material.

With his *Caesars* Suetonius appears to have struck a mother lode. His twelve biographies were imitated and continued by the eminent consular Marius Maximus, who carried the series forward to Elagabalus, *ultimus Antoninorum*. For Maximus the Suetonian model was inevitable: he was *consul ordinarius* in a neo-Trajanic era of felicity, the reign of Severus Alexander, immediately following an evil emperor. As Suetonius had closed his Twelve Caesars with Domitian, so Maximus closed with the unspeakable Elagabalus<sup>40</sup>. At least one other biographer of the Suetonian kind seems to lurk behind the source that Syme christened "*Ignotus*, the good biographer"<sup>41</sup>. And the ripest and most audacious follower of Suetonius wrote the historical fiction that we know as the *Historia Augusta*. Those imperial biographies arose most probably in the reign of Theodosius I, an age in which, according to Ammianus, both Juvenal and the Suetonian continuator Marius Maximus were much in vogue<sup>42</sup>. It was, from a literary perspective, another neo-Trajanic age, to which Ammianus himself also contributed with his continuation of Tacitus. The willful transformation of Suetonian biography into fiction simply enlarged upon the concern for personal details and eccentricities that had enlivened the original twelve imperial lives. This

<sup>39</sup> On Suetonius' career, the appendix (no. 76) in R. SYME, *Tacitus II* (Oxford 1958), 778-81 remains fundamental.

<sup>40</sup> R. SYME, *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971), 132-133.

<sup>41</sup> On *Ignotus*, see R. SYME, *op. cit.* (note 40), chapter 3.

<sup>42</sup> AMM. MARC. 28, 4, 14: *Quidam detestantes ut venena doctrinas, Iuvenalem et Marium Maximum curatiore studio legunt.*

had always been territory that was congenial for writers of fiction, and so it can hardly be accidental that Suetonius found such success in the second, third, and fourth centuries, precisely the time in which ancient novels, at least as we know them, were being written and read<sup>43</sup>. It is easy to see how the Suetonian biographies, although certainly not fictional, provided an irresistible model for the fictional ones of the *Historia Augusta*.

If adepts of fiction may be discovered among the readers of the Latin *De vita Caesarum*, so too may adepts of another new genre of biography: saints' lives and the closely related genre known as martyr acts. Here again highly original patterns of behavior, with all their intimate details, provided personal drama and excitement as diverting as anything in Suetonius or in the novelists. In the international *οἰκουμένη* of the Roman empire a complex interaction may be postulated among readers of the *Gospels*, the *Acts of Paul*, the novels, the martyr acts, the saints' lives, and Suetonian biographies. These diverse forms of reportage, whether factual or fictional, all pointed in the same direction. This was the way to enter into the turbulent lives of persons of power, courage, or godliness, persons whose lives were distinctly not quotidian.

Among the polytheists the *Historia Augusta* represented the last and degenerate manifestation of what Suetonius had created. But the Christians took up his work both as inspiration and as challenge. Its influence is unmistakable in biographies of Christian rulers as well of saints. In his Greek *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius explicitly acknowledges his rivalry with earlier biographers of emperors. His remarks may possibly reflect an acquaintance with Plutarch's imperial biographies, which were certainly known later to Damascius who quotes from the *Tiberius*<sup>44</sup>, but it sounds rather as if Suetonius and his imitators

<sup>43</sup> This material is explored in G.W. BOWERSOCK, *Fiction as History — Nero to Julian* (Berkeley 1994). If Heliodorus be assigned to the third century rather than the fourth (where I believe he belongs), it would follow that Julian was reading him in the fourth.

<sup>44</sup> DAM. *Isid.* 64, ed. C. ZINTZEN (Hildesheim 1967), 94.

provided a more immediate provocation: "For would it not be disgraceful that the memory of Nero, and other impious and godless tyrants far worse than he, should meet with diligent writers to embellish the relation of their worthless deeds with elegant language ... and that I should be silent? ... Some who have written the lives of worthless characters (οἱ μὲν γὰρ βίους ἀνδρῶν οὐ σεμνῶν ... συναγαγόντες), and the history of actions but little tending to the improvement of morals, from private motives, either love or enmity, and possibly in some cases with no better object than the display of their own learning, have exaggerated (ἐξετραγώδησαν) unduly their description of actions intrinsically base, by a refinement and elegance of diction"<sup>45</sup>. Eusebius' insistence on the need for moral edification in biography sounds more like the Plutarch of the *Parallel Lives*, whereas the attack on elegant and learned panderers of unedifying stories looks very much as if it is directed at the Suetonian tradition. Although his own biography is primarily encomiastic, his incorporation of documents *verbatim* into his text, his citation of telling anecdotes (such as Constantine's impatience with a man who praised him to excess)<sup>46</sup>, and his information about the condition of Constantine's body at the age of sixty all betray the impact of Suetonian categories<sup>47</sup>.

In writing his *Life of Isidore* in the fifth century Damascius brings into play for the first time in all extant Greek literature the very word βιογραφία, a literary debut that has aroused surprisingly little interest<sup>48</sup>. He insists that he will only include in his work those μέτρα βιογραφίας that he knows personally to be true or has actually heard directly from Isidore, and only those (αὐτὰ μόνα). In other words he not only has the word "biography" in his vocabulary, he has a clear sense of the elements (μέτρα) of biography. They evidently include non-verifiable information such as he is concerned to exclude from his work.

<sup>45</sup> EUS. *Vita Const.* 1, 10.

<sup>46</sup> *Vita Const.* 4, 48.

<sup>47</sup> *Vita Const.* 4, 53.

<sup>48</sup> DAM. *Isid.* 8, ed. C. ZINTZEN (n. 44), 10.

The late appearance of the word for biography may perhaps reflect a reluctance to take up a neologism with a verbal root  $\gamma\rho\alpha\phi$ - that had the double sense of writing and painting (as, for example, in the much more traditional term  $\zeta\omega\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\iota\alpha$ )<sup>49</sup>. In Syriac hagiography writing a biography can be described as painting an icon. In writing his prefatory comments the Syrian Damascius may have joined, to some extent, the model of Suetonius (probably the lives of grammarians and rhetors) with a more regional concept of biography.

But the model of Suetonius' *De vita Caesarum* did not disappear. It was to find its most memorable echo centuries later in Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, a work so thoroughly imbued with Suetonian spirit and diction that the author's own originality has sometimes been underestimated. Charlemagne for Einhard is *rex*, not *Caesar*, until he ultimately assumes the titles of *imperator*, *Augustus*, and *princeps*, placing him squarely in the line of the Roman emperors. Charlemagne's achievements were Caesarian in magnitude and influence, and Einhard, in his chapters devoted to the king's personal appearance, eating habits, response to conspiracies, and the like transparently adopted the Suetonian arrangement *per species* and chose a style suited to his grand subject<sup>50</sup>. It was a style he conspicuously had not used elsewhere. Suetonius' legacy to Christianity thus reasserted itself in this medieval imperial biography long after his manner had already taken up its abode in the lives of saints. Suetonius remained the master biographer. The road between *vita Caesarum* and *vita Sanctorum* was visible and well trodden.

Plutarch's fame lay instead in the amazing *Parallel Lives*, an extraordinary intellectual accomplishment that no one tried to emulate (or perhaps could). His earlier linked biographies of

<sup>49</sup> For a fuller discussion of the relation between a painted portrait (an icon) and a word portrait (biography), see G.W. BOWERSOCK, "The Syriac Life of Rabula and Syrian Hellenism", to be published in the proceedings of the 1996 Bergen Colloquium, *Greek Biography and Panegyrics in Late Antiquity*.

<sup>50</sup> See H. BEUMANN, "Topos und Gedankengefüge bei Einhard", in *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 33 (1951), 337-350.

the Caesars fell into the detritus of ancient literature, although someone presumably mined them, before they sank into oblivion, for the ἀποφθέγματα preserved in the surviving corpus of works ascribed to Plutarch. Sitting in Greece and writing the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch was a little like Pushkin at the end of *Onegin*. The friends for whom he had written his first books were either dead or (with some exceptions) far away. But, unlike Pushkin, Plutarch knew that the tide had turned forever against writings of that earlier time. No one would ever receive the slightest honor from belonging to those who wrote for Domitian's friends. By contrast Pushkin's recitation of the early strophes of his *Onegin* to the doomed Decembrists of St. Petersburg would forever be a badge of integrity<sup>51</sup>, and the poem that his dead and distant friends never saw completed would become one of the world's masterpieces. Plutarch's past was less glorious. As a biographer he had to start all over again. He had unfortunately invented the genre of *vita Caesarum* at a time that everyone chose to forget (or denounce), and hence a smooth-writing Roman careerist, by appealing to the tastes and mood of the new age, usurped his place.

<sup>51</sup> Pushkin was quoting Sadi in the final strophe of *Onegin*, first published in 1832, with full knowledge that the phrase, which he had used earlier in 1824 to introduce *The Fountain of Bahchisaray*, had been explicitly associated in 1827 with the Decembrists. See the commentary by Y.M. LOTMAN in volume III of the collected works of Pushkin (St. Petersburg 1994), 470, and the less detailed notes of V. NABOKOV in his commentary on *Onegin* (Princeton 1975), III 247.

## DISCUSSION

A. Dible: Plutarch befolgt nach seinen eigenen Worten, freilich nicht tatsächlich, in den *Kaiserviten* dasselbe literarische Programm wie in den *Parallelviten* (*Galba* 10 / *Alex.* 1). Muß man deshalb nicht neben den möglicherweise verschiedenen politischen Motiven für die Abfassung der beiden Reihen die Gesetzmässigkeit der Gattung berücksichtigen?

G. Bowersock: Yes, Plutarch claimed to have a similar biographical program in the *Galba* to that in the *Alexander*. But he manifestly failed to carry it out. I think you are right that his aims do indeed tell us what he thought the genre of biography should be. When Plutarch turned to the *Parallel Lives*, his travels to Italy and his first-hand experience of Roman affairs were behind him. He wrote in Greece in relative tranquillity. He was, in some ways, a different (or at least more mature) person. He was certainly a far more successful biographer within the guidelines he set for himself.

M. Beard: When we say Plutarch was a 'different man' when he wrote the *Parallel Lives*, we have inevitably reflected right back on the notions of identity that lie at the heart of 'biography'. 'Same' or 'different' (or, in what way 'different' while still being the 'same?') is precisely what many of our ancient authors were debating.

A. Dible: Daß man eher das Leben tugendhaften Menschen beschreiben solle als das der Großen, Mächtigen und möglicherweise Bösen, ist ein verbreitetes Motiv in der Hagiographie und beispielsweise bei Theodoret zu finden.

*M. Beard:* You have made a very strong case indeed for dating Plutarch's *Imperial lives* to the reign of Domitian, but I have doubts about the Domitianic reign of terror (93-96 CE) — at least, in exactly the form you imply. The problem is that the construction of terror may be no less a rhetorical/political device than flattery: we can see a whole variety of pressures (in the succeeding dynasty — from where, essentially, our historical accounts derive) towards constructing the final few years of Domitian's reign as a 'tyranny'. It seems to me that the history of the principate as it is told (and as we re-tell it) is constructed in a complex, often opaque, palimpsest of loaded representations; the history *is* the rhetoric. And that has implications for imperial biography: to suggest that we should see biography not (only) as a commentary or reflection on political events, but as (an integral part of) politics itself. Biography, in other words, in its writing and reading, *is* political action.

*G. Bowersock:* I agree that the 'terror' could well have been tentatively exaggerated after 96. Adalberto Giovannini addressed this question admirably in the *Entretiens on Opposition et résistances à l'Empire d'Auguste à Trajan* of 1986. But, whatever the intensity of the repression between 93 and 96, the reign of Domitian certainly took a turn for the worse in that time, and besides it is pretty clear that Plutarch's sojourns in Italy occurred before it.

*L. Piccirilli:* E' mia opinione che alcuni punti toccati dalla ricca relazione di G.W. Bowersock vadono ulteriormente sottolineati:

1) L'origine comune delle biografie dei Cesari di Plutarco e di Svetonio è da individuare in quel fenomeno noto con il nome di cesarismo: ciò spiega perché all'interesse per le varie civiltà e culture si fosse sostituito quello per il singolo individuo, l'imperatore, assunto a protagonista delle opere di Plutarco e di Svetonio.

2) L'interesse di Plutarco, sia nelle *Vite dei Cesari* sia nelle *Vite parallele*, concerneva esclusivamente lo studio del carattere;

quello di Svetonio, invece, era rivolto non solo all'*ethos* dell'individuo, l'imperatore, ma anche o soprattutto alla sua vita pubblica e privata. A Svetonio stava a cuore la dimensione privata del personaggio e desiderava fornire ai lettori una conoscenza completa del protagonista che non prescindesse dalla sfera del quotidiano, sfera bandita dall'annalistica e dalla storiografia.

3) Svetonio reputava inadeguato un tipo di biografia che non avesse uno statuto autonomo dalla storia e perciò optò per un tipo di biografia 'realistica'. Ciò spiega il motivo per il quale nei suoi *Caesares* sia assente ogni forma di diatriba intorno al rapporto fra *historia* e *bios*.

4) Quanto a Plutarco, credo che vada evidenziata la sua funzione di raccordo fra Nepote e Svetonio. E ciò, ove si consideri: che, come Nepote, Plutarco si rese interprete della tendenza al confronto fra Greci e Romani, esaminati però individualmente (conseguenza forse del cesarismo); che, al pari di Nepote, si pose il problema dei rapporti fra *historia* e *bios*, ma che, con le *Vite dei Cesari*, assurse a primo interprete del cesarismo, del quale Svetonio fu un continuatore *sui generis*.

5) Va rilevato infine che, mentre il pubblico di Plutarco era costituito da lettori dotti, tutti appartenenti al ceto abbiente, i quali coltivavano la letteratura, la filosofia, la storia e che erano in grado, per sensibilità e principi morali, d'individuare l'origine prima degli eventi del passato, quello di Svetonio era costituito da amministrativi e burocrati, desiderosi di conoscere i retroscena e gli scandali della vita pubblica e privata degli imperatori, divenuti arbitri dei loro destini.

A. Dihle: Das stilistische Eleganz und der wahrheitsgetreue Bericht als Gegensätze bezeichnet worden wie in der Einleitung zur *Probus-Vita*, ist vielleicht eine Entlehnung aus christlicher Quelle, die für die *Historia Augusta* nicht unwahrscheinlich sein dürfte. Bei den Christen ist das Motiv früh zu finden (vgl. K. Thraede, *Studien zu Sprache und Stil des Prudentius* [Göttingen 1965], 51, 72).

*W.W. Ehlers:* Den Argumenten für eine Abfassung der *Kaiserviten* Plutarchs unter Domitian möchte ich die Überlegung hinzufügen, daß die Saecularfeier 88 einen guten Anlaß bot, das erste Saeculum des Prinzipats (31 v. Chr. - 69 n. Chr.) darzustellen. Dieses Konzept konnte Caesar nicht einschließen. Der Abschluß 69 ermöglichte zudem den Verzicht auf eine Darstellung der bisherigen flavischen Herrscher, also auch Ausführungen zur Herrschaft Domitians. Domitian wird im Prooemium des Valerius Flaccus nur als Dichter genannt, nicht als möglicher Princeps, oder zumindest als fähiger Politiker oder Soldat; er ist durch den plötzlichen Tod des Titus unerwartet rasch an die Macht gelangt. — Im Gegensatz zu Plutarch scheint Valerius Flaccus Caesar implizit in die Reihe der Caesares einzuschließen (1, 9), wie dann Sueton.

*G. Bowersock:* I think that your interpretation of the reference to Domitian in Valerius Flaccus is right. As for Caesar, if the poet really did see Caesar as the first of the emperors, he was working independently of the official position as represented in the imperial oath of the time. But I cannot myself see anything in *Argonautica* 1, 9 beyond an allusion to Julius Caesar's problems off the coast of Britain. There is not the slightest hint of a place in a succession of Roman emperors. The point, as I see it, is to flatter Vespasian. And the phrase *Phrygios ... Iulos* hardly looks like the proclamation of a dynastic foundation.

*S.M. Maul:* Gibt es Hinweise darauf, daß Poeten oder Schriftsteller im Auftrage des römischen Kaisers biographische Schriften erstellten?

*G. Bowersock:* No one can be said to have written *biographical* pieces on the instructions of a Roman emperor. But some poets certainly included biographical material in compositions destined for court consumption. I think particularly of epigrammatists, such as Crinagoras or the Tiberian circle around Antonia.

A. Dihle: Daß die Legitimität eines Herrschers aus seiner Zugehörigkeit zu einer Dynastie hergeleitet wird, gab es im Hellenismus, ohne daß sich dieses literarisch in einer Biographienreihe niedergeschlagen hätte. In julisch-claudischer Zeit gab es *de facto* eine Dynastie, aber man vermied es, daraus die Legitimität herzuleiten, während der dynastische Gedanke bei den Flaviern erstmals feste Formen annimmt. Verfasste Plutarch unter diesem Eindruck die Reihe der Kaiserbiographien? Er war platonischer Philosoph, und bei den Philosophen gab es die schon lange Vorstellung von einer Beglaubigung der Lehrtradition durch die Reihe der Schulhäupter.

G. Bowersock: Your invocation of the pedagogic *διαδοχή* is highly pertinent. It might well have justified, in Plutarch's mind, the exploitation of the legitimation process so evident in the *Kaisereid* and the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani*.

W.W. Ehlers: Die undifferenzierte Verwendung des Begriffs *διαδοχή* im Zusammenhang mit Philosophenschulen, Herrscherdynastien, Historiographen und Epikern läßt entscheidende qualitative Unterschiede außer acht. In der Historiographie handelt es sich überwiegend um eine bloß chronologische Anknüpfung (*a fine Aufidi Bassi*), nicht um die Fortführung einer inhaltlich bestimmten Tradition.

M. Beard: The issue of visual imagery that you raised is important: it might provide a link between some of the earlier papers and the discussions of biography, as a literary genre; it might also help us to draw into our frame material that might otherwise get left out. Werner Eck, for example, has stressed the importance of taking inscribed honorific dedications (often in the form of a *cur-sus*) together with the monument or portrait statue that regularly accompanied them. This might prompt us to think more about Varro's *Imagines* — and then, too, about ancient physiognomical theory and how individual character might be seen to be encoded in external appearance, way of walking etc.

