

P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

SUETONIUS

THE TWELVE CAESARS

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GAIUS SUETONIUS
TRANQUILLUS

The Twelve Caesars

Translated by ROBERT GRAVES

Revised with an Introduction and Notes by J. B. RIVES

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Abbreviations

SUETONIUS' LIVES

<i>Aug.</i>	Divus Augustus	<i>Nero</i>	Nero
<i>Calig.</i>	Gaius Caligula	<i>Otho</i>	Otho
<i>Claud.</i>	Divus Claudius	<i>Tib.</i>	Tiberius
<i>Dom.</i>	Domitian	<i>Tit.</i>	Divus Titus
<i>Galba</i>	Galba	<i>Vesp.</i>	Divus Vespasian
<i>Jul.</i>	Divus Julius	<i>Vit.</i>	Vitellius

ROMAN PRAENOMINA

A.	Aulus	Mam.	Mamercus
Ap.	Appius	P.	Publius
C.	Gaius	Q.	Quintus
Cn.	Gnaeus	Ser.	Servius
D.	Decimus	Sex.	Sextus
L.	Lucius	T.	Titus
M.	Marcus	Ti.	Tiberius
M'.	Manius		

ROMAN MAGISTRACIES

aed.	aedile	pr.	praetor
cos.	consul	q.	quaestor
cos. suff.	suffect consul	tr.	tribune

Chronology

BC

- 133 Tribune and death of Ti. Sempronius Gracchus.
- 122 Second tribunate of C. Sempronius Gracchus; opposition of M. Livius Drusus.
- 112-106 War with Jugurtha; C. Marius elected consul in 107 to take command of the war.
- 104-100 Marius consul five times in a row; defeats the invading Germanic tribes of the Teutones and Cimbri in 102 and 101.
- 100 Legislation and death of L. Appuleius Saturninus. Birth of Julius Caesar.
- 91 Assassination of the younger M. Livius Drusus.
- 91-87 Social (Marsic) War between Rome and its Italian allies.
- 88-85 First war with Mithridates under the command of L. Cornelius Sulla; in Rome, Marius and L. Cornelius Cinna take control and kill the supporters of Sulla.
- 84 Caesar marries Cornelia.
- 83-82 Sulla returns to Italy; civil war between partisans of Sulla and partisans of Cinna; Sulla's victory followed by proscriptions. In Asia, second war with Mithridates.
- 82-79 Sulla dictator; Q. Sertorius begins guerrilla war in Spain, which lasts until 72.
- 80 Caesar's military service in Asia and Bithynia.
- 78-77 Revolt of M. Aemilius Lepidus in Italy.
- 75 Caesar travels to Rhodes and is kidnapped by pirates.
- 74-66 Third war with Mithridates.
- 72 Caesar military tribune.

- 70 Cn. Pompeius (Pompey) and L. Licinius Crassus consuls for the first time.
- 69 Caesar quaestor in Rome and Further Spain; his wife Cornelia dies.
- 67 Caesar marries Pompeia.
- 65 Caesar aedile.
- 63 Caesar elected pontifex maximus; conspiracy of L. Sergius Catilina. Birth of C. Octavius, the future emperor Augustus (23 September).
- 62 Caesar praetor; divorces Pompeia.
- 61 Caesar governor of Further Spain.
- 60 Caesar stands for consulship; forms so-called 'First Triumvirate' with Pompey and Crassus.
- 59 Caesar consul; marries Calpurnia. Pompey marries Caesar's daughter Julia.
- 58-50 Caesar's command in Gaul.
- 56 Renewal of 'First Triumvirate' at Luca.
- 55 Pompey and Crassus consuls for the second time. Caesar crosses Rhine; invades Britain.
- 54 Caesar's second invasion of Britain. Death of Julia, daughter of Caesar and wife of Pompey.
- 52 P. Clodius killed by supporters of T. Annius Milo; Pompey sole consul; Caesar exempted from standing for consulship in person. Battle of Gergovia in Gaul. Parthians defeat Crassus at Carrhae.
- 49 Senate decrees that Caesar must dismiss his army and disallows the tribunes' veto; Caesar crosses the Rubicon; Pompey leaves Italy for Greece. Caesar besieges Massilia and defeats the Pompeian forces in Spain; returns to Rome.
- 48 Caesar crosses Adriatic; besieges Pompey at Dyrrhachium, then defeats him at Pharsalus. Pompey flees to Alexandria and is murdered; Caesar follows; war with Ptolemy.
- 47 Caesar defeats Ptolemy, has affair with Cleopatra; marches to Asia Minor and defeats Pharnaces; returns to Rome; sails to North Africa.
- 46 Caesar defeats Q. Caecilius Metellus Scipio and Juba in Africa; returns to Rome and reforms calendar; sails to Spain.

- 45 Caesar defeats the sons of Pompey at Munda in Spain; returns to Rome and receives exceptional honours.
- 44 Caesar made dictator for life; refuses crown at Lupercalia in February; assassinated (15 March). He posthumously adopts his grandnephew C. Octavius, who takes the name C. Julius Caesar Octavianus (Octavian, the future Augustus).
- 43 War of Mutina: Octavian and the Senate against M. Antonius (Mark Antony); Octavian's first consulship. Octavian, Antony and M. Aemilius Lepidus establish the triumvirate.
- 42 War of Philippi: Octavian and Antony against M. Junius Brutus and C. Cassius Longinus. Birth of Tiberius (16 November).
- 41-40 War of Perugia: Octavian against L. Antonius.
- 40 Execution of Q. Salvidienus Rufus. Antony marries Octavia.
- 38 Octavian marries Livia.
- 38-36 Naval war off Sicily: Octavian against Sextus Pompey.
- 36 Octavian defeats Sextus Pompey, strips Lepidus of power.
- 35-33 Octavian campaigns against the Dalmatae in Illyricum.
- 32 Octavian breaks with Antony.
- 31 Octavian's third consulship. Battle of Actium: Octavian against Antony and Cleopatra.
- 30 Octavian's fourth consulship; death of Antony and Cleopatra.
- 29 Octavian's fifth consulship; triple triumph.
- 28 Octavian's sixth consulship; first census and purge of the Senate.
- 27 Octavian's seventh consulship; adopts the name Augustus. Disgrace and suicide of C. Cornelius Gallus.
- 26-25 Augustus' eighth and ninth consulships; campaigns in Spain against the Cantabri.
- 23 Augustus' eleventh consulship. Augustus seriously ill, but recovers. Conspiracy of A. Terentius Varro Murena and Fannius Caepio. Augustus receives tribunician power for life; death of his nephew Marcellus.
- 21 M. Vipsanius Agrippa marries Julia the elder, Augustus' daughter.
- 20 Parthians return Roman standards; Tiberius installs Tigranes III as king of Armenia.

- 18 Second purge of the Senate; laws on adultery, marriage and luxury.
- 17 Augustus adopts his grandsons Gaius and Lucius; celebrates the Saecular Games.
- 16 Germans cross Rhine and defeat M. Lollius.
- 16-15 Tiberius and Drusus campaign in the Alps.
- 13 Tiberius' first consulship.
- 12 Augustus elected pontifex maximus. Death of Agrippa.
- 12-9 Campaigns of Tiberius in Pannonia and Drusus in Germany.
- 11 Tiberius marries Julia the elder.
- 10 Birth of Claudius (1 August).
- 9 Tiberius' first consulship; death of Drusus.
- 9-7 Campaigns of Tiberius in Germany.
- 8 Augustus' second census.
- 7 Tiberius' second consulship; given tribunician power for five years.
- 6 Tiberius retires to Rhodes.
- 5 Augustus' twelfth consulship; introduction of Gaius to public life.
- 3 Birth of Galba (24 December).
- 2 Augustus' thirteenth consulship; introduction of Lucius to public life. Augustus proclaimed 'Father of His Country'. Dedication of Temple of Mars Ultor. Exile of Julia the elder.
- 1 Gaius sent to the east as commander.

AD

- 2 Death of Lucius at Massilia; Tiberius returns to Rome.
- 4 Death of Gaius in Lycia. Augustus adopts Tiberius and Agrippa Postumus; Tiberius adopts Germanicus.
- 4-6 Campaigns of Tiberius in Germany.
- 6 Disinheritance of Agrippa Postumus.
- 6-9 Revolt in Illyricum; campaigns of Tiberius.
- 8 Exile of Julia the younger.

- 9 Revolt in Germany; massacre of Roman troops under P. Quinctilius Varus. Birth of Vespasian (17 November).
- 10-12 Campaigns of Tiberius in Germany.
- 12 Germanicus' first consulship; Tiberius' Illyrian triumph. Birth of Gaius (31 August). Birth of Vitellius (7 September?).
- 13-16 Campaigns of Germanicus in Germany.
- 14 Augustus' third census. Death of Augustus (19 August); Tiberius becomes emperor. Death of Agrippa Postumus. Mutinies in Pannonia and Germany. L. Aelius Sejanus made praetorian prefect.
- 16 Trial and suicide of M. Scribonius Libo Drusus.
- 17 Cn. Calpurnius Piso made governor of Syria. Germanicus' German triumph; sent to the east. Cappadocia made a Roman province.
- 18 Tiberius' third consulship, with Germanicus; Germanicus visits Egypt.
- 19 Expulsion of Jews from Rome. Death of Germanicus.
- 20 Trial and suicide of Cn. Calpurnius Piso.
- 21 Tiberius' fourth consulship, with his son Drusus.
- 23 Death of Tiberius' son Drusus.
- 27 Tiberius retires to Capreae.
- 29 Death of Livia; exile of Agrippina the elder.
- 31 Tiberius' fifth consulship, with Sejanus. Tiberius summons Gaius to Capreae. Death of Germanicus' son Nero (?). Fall and death of Sejanus.
- 32 Birth of Otho (28 April).
- 33 Deaths of Germanicus' son Drusus and Agrippina the elder. First consulship of Galba.
- 37 Death of Tiberius (16 March); Gaius becomes emperor. Gaius' first consulship, with Claudius. Death of the younger Antonia. Gaius seriously ill in the autumn. Death of Tiberius Gemellus. Birth of Nero (15 December).
- 38 Deaths of Q. Sutorius Macro and Gaius' sister Drusilla; Gaius visits Sicily.
- 39 Gaius' second consulship; birth of his daughter and marriage to Caesonia. Conspiracy of Cn. Cornelius Lentulus Gaetulicus; trial of M. Aemilius Lepidus and exile of Gaius' sisters Agrippina and Livilla. Birth of Titus (30 December).

- 39-40 Gaius campaigns in Gaul and Germany.
- 40 Gaius' third consulship; death of Ptolemy of Mauretania.
- 41 Gaius' fourth consulship. Assassination of Gaius (24 January); Claudius becomes emperor. Gaius' sisters Agrippina and Livilla brought back from exile; death of Livilla.
- 42 Claudius' second consulship. Death of C. Appius Junius Silanus; attempted coup of Furius Camillus Scribonianus.
- 43 Claudius' third consulship, with L. Vitellius. Invasion of Britain.
- 44 Claudius' triumph for the conquest of Britain.
- 47 Claudius' fourth consulship, with L. Vitellius; celebrates Saecular Games. Claudius' censorship, with L. Vitellius. Death of Cn. Pompeius Magnus.
- 48 'Marriage' of Messalina and C. Silius; execution of Messalina. Consulship of Vitellius.
- 49 Claudius marries Agrippina the younger. Death of L. Junius Silanus.
- 50 Claudius adopts Nero.
- 51 Claudius' fifth consulship, with Vespasian as suffect consul. Birth of Domitian (24 October).
- 52 Nero acts as prefect of the city during the Latin Festival.
- 53 Marriage of Nero and Octavia; trial and execution of Domitia Lepida.
- 54 Death of Claudius (13 October); Nero becomes emperor.
- 55 Nero's first consulship. Death of Britannicus.
- 57-8 Nero's second and third consulships.
- 59 The Great Games. Death of Agrippina. Otho becomes governor of Lusitania.
- 60 Nero's fourth consulship; first celebration of the Neronia. Galba becomes governor of Tarraconensian Spain.
- 60-61 Revolt in Britain.
- 62 Roman defeat in Armenia. Deaths of Octavia and Sex. Afranius Burrus. Nero marries Poppaea.
- 64 Nero's first stage appearance, in Neapolis; second celebration of the Neronia. Great fire in Rome; persecution of Christians; construction of the Golden House.
- 65 Discovery of the Pisonian conspiracy. Deaths of Poppaea, Claudius' daughter Antonia and Seneca.

- 66 Nero marries Statilia Messalina. Coronation of Tiridates in Rome. Beginning of the revolt in Judaea.
- 66-7 Nero tours Greece. Vespasian sent to command the Roman forces in Judaea.
- 68 C. Julius Vindex raises a revolt against Nero (March); Galba joins the revolt and is acclaimed emperor by his troops (April); Vindex defeated by L. Verginius Rufus (May); Galba is recognized as emperor by the Senate (8 June?); Nero commits suicide (9 or 11 June). Vitellius becomes governor of Lower Germany (December).
- 69 Galba's second consulship. Army in Upper Germany withholds allegiance from Galba (1 January); Vitellius acclaimed emperor by his troops (2 January); Galba adopts L. Calpurnius Piso (10 January). Otho's coup; death of Galba (15 January). Otho sets out to meet the army of Vitellius (mid-March). Battle of Betriacum between the armies of Otho and Vitellius (14 April); Otho commits suicide (16 April?); Vitellius recognized as emperor by the Senate (19 April). Vespasian proclaimed as emperor by the army in Egypt (1 July), followed by the armies in Judaea, Syria and Moesia (July-August). Burning of the Capitol (19 December); death of Vitellius (20 or 21 December); Vespasian recognized as emperor by the Senate.
- 69-70 Vespasian in Egypt.
- 70 Vespasian's second consulship, with Titus. Domitian marries Domitia Longina. Birth of Suetonius (?).
- 71 Vespasian's third consulship, with the future emperor Nerva. Judean triumph of Vespasian and Titus.
- 72-8 Vespasian's fourth to eighth consulships (72, 75-8) and censorship (73-4), all with Titus.
- 79 Vespasian's ninth consulship, with Titus. Death of Vespasian (23 June); Titus becomes emperor. Eruption of Mount Vesuvius.
- 80 Titus' eighth consulship, with Domitian. Dedication of the Flavian Amphitheatre.
- 81 Death of Titus (13 September); Domitian becomes emperor.
- 82-8 Domitian's eighth to fourteenth consulships.

- 83 Triumph over the Chatti; Domitian divorces and remarries Domitia.
- 86 Triumph over the Dacians. Celebration of Capitoline Games.
- 88 Celebration of the Saecular Games.
- 89 Attempted revolt by L. Antonius Saturninus. Double triumph over the Chatti and the Dacians.
- 90 Domitian's fifteenth consulship.
- 92 Domitian's sixteenth consulship; campaigns against the Sarmatians.
- 93 Expulsion of philosophers from Rome. Deaths of Q. Junius Arulenus Rusticus and the younger Helvidius.
- 95 Domitian's seventeenth consulship. Death of T. Flavius Clemens.
- 96 Assassination of Domitian (18 September); Nerva becomes emperor.
- 97 First mention of Suetonius in the letters of Pliny the Younger.
- 98 Death of Nerva (end of January); Trajan becomes emperor.
- 112 Death of Pliny the Younger (?).
- 117 Death of Trajan; Hadrian becomes emperor.
- 119 Hadrian appoints Suetonius' patron C. Septicius Clarus as praetorian prefect, and (?) Suetonius as imperial secretary in charge of correspondence; Suetonius at work on *The Twelve Caesars*.
- 122 Hadrian dismisses both Septicius Clarus and Suetonius (?).
after 130 Death of Suetonius (?).

some connections with the court. He provides more specific information about his father, Suetonius Laetus: since he served as a military tribune in the army of the emperor Otho in the spring of AD 69 (*Otho* 10), he must have belonged to the equestrian order, the second tier of the Roman elite, and had a public career.

Suetonius' full name was Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. Although we do not know the year of his birth, he tells us that he was a young man in the year AD 88 (*Nero* 57), and it is generally thought that he was born around AD 70; one scholar has suggested that his cognomen Tranquillus, 'Peaceful', would have been very appropriate to a child born after the civil wars of AD 68-9. The place of his birth is uncertain. One possibility is Hippo Regius: the inscription found there, an honorific dedication to Suetonius erected at public expense in one of the main squares of the city, suggests that he may have been a native of the city who achieved notable success in the wider world. Wherever he was born, he was in Rome by the 90s, since he records an incident from the reign of Domitian that he himself witnessed (*Dom.* 12). It was presumably in Rome that he embarked on the scholarly studies that became one of his chief occupations. It was also surely in Rome that he acquired as his patron and benefactor Gaius Plinius Secundus, conventionally known as Pliny the Younger. Pliny was one of the leading figures of his day, a noted orator and writer who had a very successful public career, and who is now known chiefly through a surviving collection of his letters. Suetonius makes his first appearance in this collection in two letters written around the year AD 97, when he was probably in his late twenties. From one of these (*Epistles* 1.18), it appears that he was practising as an advocate, that is, a professional speaker who represented people in court cases; in the other (*Epistles* 1.24), Pliny writes to a friend about a small property outside Rome that Suetonius was hoping to buy as a country retreat.

Pliny continued to act as Suetonius' benefactor for some fifteen years, as we can tell from the four further letters that refer to him. From Pliny's letters we can deduce two things. First, Suetonius had an interest in pursuing a public career. At

some point in the period AD 101-103 Pliny in fact obtained for him a position as military tribune, the same sort of position his father had held, with a legion in Britain (*Epistles* 3.8); unlike his father, however, Suetonius did not take up this post, but asked for it to be transferred to a cousin. Whatever his reasons for making this request, Pliny was apparently not offended by it, and continued to act as his patron. Suetonius may in fact have been on Pliny's staff when Pliny served as governor of the province of Pontus and Bithynia on a special appointment by the emperor Trajan. It was from here that Pliny wrote to Trajan asking him to grant Suetonius the privileges granted to fathers of three children, a favour that Trajan granted (*Epistles* 10.94-5; see further 'Papiian-Poppaeian Law' in the Glossary of Terms). This exchange of letters dates to the second year of Pliny's governorship, AD 110-11; since Pliny then disappears from the historical record, it is usually assumed that he died shortly thereafter. Suetonius would accordingly have needed to find another patron if he wished to continue advancing in his public career, and he seems to have found one in Pliny's circle: C. Septicius Clarus, the dedicatee of the first volume of Pliny's collected letters (*Epistles* 1.1).

The second fact about Suetonius that emerges from Pliny's letters is his interest in scholarly and literary pursuits. In one of the earliest letters to mention him, Pliny describes him as *scholasticus*, 'scholarly' (*Epistles* 1.24.4). Somewhat later, probably around AD 105 or 106, Pliny writes to encourage Suetonius to publish some work that he has completed but not yet made public (*Epistles* 5.10). A year or so after that, he writes to get Suetonius' opinion about a public reading of some of his own verse (*Epistles* 9.34), and in his letter to Trajan he describes Suetonius as not only highly respectable and honourable, but also as *eruditissimus*, 'extremely learned' (*Epistles* 10.94.1). For Pliny, a public career and literary pursuits went hand in hand, as his letters attest. He was not alone in this: his uncle, Pliny the Elder, had combined a very successful career as an equestrian official with extensive literary activity, of which the younger Pliny proudly provided a detailed catalogue (*Epistles* 3.5). The esteem for literary and scholarly pursuits that Pliny

displays seems in fact to have been widespread among the men of his set, which included among others the historian Tacitus.

We have the fullest account of the scholarly side of Suetonius' career from a work entitled *Suda*, a Byzantine encyclopedia dating to the late tenth century AD. The entry on Suetonius (under 'Tranquillus', T 895 in the standard edition of Eve Adler), reads as follows:

Tranquillus, called Suetonius, Roman *grammaticus*. He wrote *On Greek Pastimes*, one volume; *On Roman Spectacles and Contests*, two volumes; *On the Roman Year*, one volume; *On Critical Marks in Books*, one volume; *On Cicero's Republic*, one volume, in response to Didymus; *On the Correct Names and Form of Clothes and Sandals and Other Things that People Wear*; *On Abusive Words or Insults and their Derivation*; *On Rome and its Customs and Usages*, two volumes; *Family Tree of the Caesars*, which covers their lives and successions from Julius to Domitian, eight volumes; *On Illustrious Roman Men*.

Other sources preserve additional titles: *On Notable Prostitutes*, *On Bodily Defects*, *On the Institution of Offices*, *On Kings*, *On Varied Topics* and *The Meadow* (*Pratum* or *Prata*, a miscellany). Almost all these works are lost, although they were much used by later scholars, to whose references and citations we owe most of our information about them.

What can we deduce from this material about Suetonius' activities as a scholar? The *Suda* entry describes him as a *grammaticus*, a teacher of literature, one who specialized in the meaning and usage of particular words and the explication of obscure names and references. This approach to literary studies had developed in the Greek world in the last few centuries BC, and by the first century BC had become established in Rome as well. It is unlikely, however, that Suetonius was a professional teacher, since as an *eques* he would not have needed to earn a living in this way; he was no doubt instead what we would now call an independent scholar. In describing Suetonius as a *grammaticus*, therefore, the *Suda* was merely indicating his field of accomplishment.

The tradition of 'grammatical' scholarship was what underlay and united Suetonius' varied writings. Some of his works focused precisely on the meaning and usage of words, such as those on insults and clothes. Others were apparently antiquarian in nature, such as those on Greek games, Roman spectacles, the Roman year and the institution of offices. Lastly, some were biographical, such as those on notable prostitutes, illustrious Roman men and, of course, the Caesars. Apart from *The Twelve Caesars*, only parts of the work on illustrious Roman men survive intact; for most of the rest we have only scattered and brief citations. Of two works, however, those on insults and on Greek games, we have brief summaries produced in the Byzantine period. These are very helpful in giving us some sense of what Suetonius' lexicographical and antiquarian works were like. Suetonius composed both works in Greek, a useful reminder of his close familiarity with the Greek literary and intellectual tradition. That on insults, at least in its current form, consists of a historical preface followed by fourteen chapters that group the insults in various categories (terms for boasters, gossips, dimwits and so forth; insults derived from the names of cities or numbers); within the chapters, each word is given a definition and an etymology, and illustrated by citations from various authors. The overall impression is of a work that Pliny would no doubt have described as 'extremely learned', organized almost as a series of index cards.

The only writings of Suetonius to which we can assign even approximate dates are his two major biographical works, *On Illustrious Men* and *The Twelve Caesars*. The former probably appeared sometime between AD 107 and 118, and was a major work comprising brief lives of probably well over 100 Latin men of letters. Its format was much like the one Suetonius used in his work on insults: the biographies were grouped into separate sections according to the field for which the subject was known (poets, orators, historians, philosophers, *grammatici* and rhetors, teachers of rhetoric); each section consisted of a preface, discussing the origin, history and nature of the genre in question, and then a series of entries on the individual writers in chronological order. A range of evidence gives us a

fairly good idea of its scope and nature: the section on *grammatici* and rhetors has survived largely intact; a few other lives preserved in various sources derive from it (certainly those of Terence, Horace, Lucan, Pliny the Elder and Crispus Passienus; probably those of Virgil, Tibullus and Persius); and the *Chronicle* of St Jerome, who mined it for data, provides a reasonable guide to its remaining contents. These lives were on a much smaller scale than those of the Caesars; the lives of *grammatici* and rhetors rarely exceed 200 words, and the life of Terence, the longest of the surviving lives of poets, is barely more than a third as long as the shortest of the lives of the Caesars. Even so, *On Illustrious Men* must when complete have been a major work of scholarship, and it clearly served as an authoritative reference for centuries afterwards.

Although Suetonius' scholarly productions may seem remote from his public career, it would be a mistake to see these as sharply distinct spheres of his life. As I noted above, the leading men of the day often combined literary interests and scholarly pursuits with public careers. Even the soldierly Trajan valued this sort of learning, or so at least Pliny asserts in his encomium of that emperor: 'How you honour the teachers of rhetoric and the professors of philosophy! Under you scholarly pursuits have regained their breath and lifeblood and native country' (*Panegyric* 47.1). Although Pliny's praise may well reflect an ideal rather than reality, the ideal itself is significant: since elite Romans like Pliny placed a high value on literature and learning, it was important that the emperor be seen to patronize these pursuits. It was in fact Trajan who probably appointed Suetonius to the first of his major offices in the imperial bureaucracy, as secretary 'for studies' (*a studiis*) and 'for libraries' (*a bibliothecis*). Although the duties of these two positions are not entirely certain, the latter presumably included oversight of the public libraries in Rome, while the former perhaps involved acting as a sort of combined research assistant and cultural adviser to the emperor. Certainly Suetonius, as we have seen, would have been eminently qualified for all these roles.

Since it is only from the Hippo inscription that we know

about these two posts, the chronology is not clear; it is possible that Suetonius held them not under Trajan, but early in the reign of Trajan's successor Hadrian. At any rate, it was certainly under Hadrian that Suetonius held his most important position, that of secretary in charge of the emperor's correspondence (*ab epistulis*). And it was in the same period that he embarked on his magnum opus, *The Twelve Caesars* (this is the title that has become conventional in English; a more literal translation of the Latin title, *De vita Caesarum*, is *On the Life of the Caesars*). Although its preface has perished, the sixth-century Byzantine writer John the Lydian (*On Magistracies* 2.6) reports that Suetonius dedicated it to his new patron, C. Septicius Clarus, whom Hadrian appointed praetorian prefect around the year AD 119 (*Augustan History, Hadrian* 9.5). Suetonius was thus at the peak of his public career as well as his scholarly achievement, working in close proximity to the emperor at the very centre of power. But it was not to last for very long. According to the *Augustan History*, which dates probably from the late fourth century AD, Hadrian 'assigned successors to Septicius Clarus, the praetorian prefect, and Suetonius Tranquillus, the minister for correspondence, and many others, because they had without permission been conducting themselves before his wife Sabina in a more familiar fashion than court etiquette required' (*Augustan History, Hadrian* 11.3). What actually happened remains a mystery. Even the date is uncertain: the *Augustan History* mentions the dismissal immediately after Hadrian's visit to Britain, which can be securely dated to AD 122, but its accuracy in details like this is by no means unimpeachable.

Thereafter, we have no further evidence for Suetonius, as either a public official or a learned writer. At the end of his life of Titus he refers to Domitian's wife Domitia Longina in the past tense, as if she were dead (*Tit.* 10); since she seems to have been still alive at the end of the 120s, Suetonius may have continued to work on *The Twelve Caesars* for a number of years after his dismissal.

2. THE TWELVE CAESARS

An awareness of Suetonius' life and career should make it clear that his *The Twelve Caesars* is not simply the ancient equivalent of a scandal sheet. Suetonius was a serious scholar, who had already made his reputation with several major works. Serious scholars are of course perfectly capable of writing scandalous exposés: the early Byzantine writer Procopius, for example, a major historian and government official of the sixth century AD, did exactly that in his *Secret History*, a scurrilous account of the emperor Justinian and his consort Theodora. But a comparison with Procopius' other writings, notably the eight-volume *History of the Wars of Justinian*, makes it immediately obvious that *Secret History* was little more than a diversion. *The Twelve Caesars*, in contrast, was apparently by far the most substantial of Suetonius' works: it filled eight volumes, whereas *On Illustrious Men* extended perhaps to five, and the others only to one or two.

Not only is *The Twelve Caesars* Suetonius' longest work, but it also clearly involved extensive and careful research. For example, Suetonius argues that, contrary to received opinion, Augustus had a favourable view of Tiberius, and quotes in support several extracts from Augustus' letters (*Tib.* 21); he has a detailed discussion about the birthplace of the emperor Gaius, drawing on a letter of Augustus as well as public records to refute the views of two earlier writers (*Calig.* 8); he insists that 'my own careful researches have turned up no evidence whatsoever' to substantiate allegations about the low origins of Vespasian's family (*Vesp.* 1). He certainly drew on a range of material, including various documentary sources: he made use of the public records for information about the birthplaces of Tiberius and Caligula (*Tib.* 5, *Calig.* 8) and of *The Achievements of the Divine Augustus*, Augustus' official account of his reign, for the number of Augustus' spectacles (*Aug.* 43). He also cites personal documents of the emperors, from which he often, contrary to the normal practice of ancient historians, quotes passages verbatim. Among the most interesting are

letters of Augustus, which he quotes extensively (for example, *Aug.* 51, 64, 71, 76, 86; *Tib.* 21; *Calig.* 8; *Claud.* 4); he saw the originals, since he comments on Augustus' handwriting and spelling (*Aug.* 87-8). In addition, he made use of Julius Caesar's will (*Jul.* 83), Augustus' autobiography and will (*Aug.* 2, 101), Tiberius' autobiography and will (*Tib.* 61, 76), Claudius' memoirs (*Claud.* 41), Nero's poems in the original working manuscripts (*Nero* 52) and Domitian's essay on the care of hair (*Dom.* 18). He also drew on other primary sources like the letters of Mark Antony (for example, *Aug.* 7, 16, 69) and, intriguingly, anonymous lampoons and popular songs, which he often records verbatim (for example, *Aug.* 70, *Tib.* 59, *Calig.* 6 and 8, *Nero* 39, *Galba* 6, *Otho* 3, *Dom.* 14). All in all, then, *The Twelve Caesars* gives every sign of being a careful and substantial piece of work by a serious and established scholar; to the extent that Suetonius included gossip and scandal (and even a cursory reading shows that much of what he included is not scandalous at all), he presumably did so for some larger purpose.

But if it is not simply gossip, it is not formal history either. In the Graeco-Roman tradition, history was a recognized literary genre with well established features: it was a dramatic prose narrative with a focus on military and political events and an elevated style. In none of these respects does *The Twelve Caesars* fit the bill. Although most of the lives do contain a certain amount of narrative, the arrangement is more often topical than chronological, and even when it is chronological it rarely constitutes a dramatic narrative. As for subject matter, Suetonius often alludes to major military and political events, but omits a great deal that we would expect to find in a proper history. We would know little of Caesar's wars in Gaul, for example, if we had only *The Twelve Caesars*, and would be completely unaware of major figures like Cn. Domitius Corbulo, the greatest Roman general of the mid first century AD, whose name Suetonius never even mentions. When Suetonius is our only source for a significant historical event, as he is, for example, for the Vinician conspiracy against Nero (*Nero* 36), it becomes frustratingly obvious how little information he

actually provides. Lastly, Suetonius' style of writing is a far cry from that of Latin historians like Livy and Tacitus: although generally efficient and at times quite effective, it by no means observes the normal conventions of literary prose. *The Twelve Caesars* abounds in the sort of technical vocabulary and everyday expressions that Livy and Tacitus avoided; Suetonius likewise does not hesitate to introduce Greek words and phrases as needed (something regarded as inappropriate in formal Latin: see *Tib.* 71), and at times is so keen to pack in data that his writing becomes overly compressed and difficult to understand.

Many of these features can be explained by the fact that Suetonius wrote *The Twelve Caesars* as a work of scholarly biography, and not history at all. Suetonius rigorously excludes everything that does not directly pertain to the person on whom he is focusing, and includes everything that does: hence the absence of major historical events and figures, and hence the presence of so much personal and domestic detail. Yet the simple fact that he was writing biography does not fully account for the distinctive format that he employed. A person's life, after all, consists in large part of a chronological series of events, and an obvious way to recount that life is by means of a dramatic narrative. The other great biographer of antiquity, the Greek writer Plutarch, an older contemporary of Suetonius, did precisely that; as a result, although he too maintains a tight focus on the individual, his biographies often read very much like history. Suetonius, by contrast, seems deliberately to have made his biographies as unlike history as possible.

All the lives share the same basic format: an initial chronological section recounting the emperor's birth and life up to his accession, preceded by a section on ancestry and parentage; then an account of his reign, organized topically; then another chronological section describing his death. Within this basic framework there is considerable variation. Some lives contain a high proportion of narrative: that of Caesar, for example, who never really reigned at all, and those of Galba, Otho and Vitellius, about whose short reigns there was much less to say than about their rise and fall. There are also several different

arrangements of topics within the section on the reign. In the life of Augustus, for example, Suetonius divides his material into two main blocks dealing respectively with his public and private life; the same basic pattern occurs in the life of Claudius, although there Suetonius includes in the section on private life a lengthy discussion of Claudius' vices and failings. In contrast, the arrangement in the central sections of the lives of Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian is fundamentally different: in the lives of these 'bad' emperors Suetonius first deals with the positive or neutral aspects of their reigns, and then goes on to discuss at greater length the negative aspects. Following this introduction I have provided analyses of the individual lives so that readers can see at a glance Suetonius' various principles of organization.

But, in virtually all the lives, the topical sections tend to dominate. The longest life, that of Augustus, has very little real narrative at all. Suetonius reports the main events of Augustus' life up to his first position of power in a single short paragraph (*Aug.* 8), and then announces that 'the story will be more readable and understandable if, instead of keeping chronological order, I use a topical arrangement' (*Aug.* 9). As it happens, there is a sort of narrative in the next section, which deals with Augustus' civil wars in more or less chronological order. But Suetonius, by prefacing this section with a preliminary summary, makes it explicit that the underlying principle of organization is in fact topical: '[Augustus] fought five civil wars, associated respectively with the geographical names Mutina, Philippi, Perusia, Sicily and Actium' (*Aug.* 9). This sort of prospective summary is very common in *The Twelve Caesars*, although it is not always immediately obvious. For example, after describing Nero's tour of Greece and triumphant return to Italy, Suetonius says that 'his insolence, lust, extravagance, greed and cruelty he at first revealed only gradually and secretly' (*Nero* 26). To the unwary, this might appear simply as a general observation about Nero's character; those familiar with Suetonius' method, however, will suspect that such a list is in fact serving as a summary of what is to come, and rightly so: in the thirteen chapters that follow, Suetonius goes on to provide

examples of each vice, following the precise order that he indicates in his initial comment.

Suetonius' use of a topical arrangement is in certain respects not only non-historical but even anti-historical, since it obliges him to pull apart individual episodes and file their various component parts under separate headings. We may take as an example one of the most famous events from the reign of Nero, the Great Fire of AD 64, during which the emperor is proverbially said to have 'fiddled' ('played the lyre' would be more historically accurate). Suetonius duly includes this story, as an example of Nero's cruelty towards the people of Rome (*Nero* 38), and also records some events that, as we know from other sources, were linked to the fire: Nero's persecution of Christians, his new regulations on urban construction (both in *Nero* 16) and the construction of his massive Golden House (*Nero* 31). But Suetonius' presentation completely obscures the historical connection between these events: he lists the first two among Nero's useful acts of public policy, with no mention of their relation to the fire, and discusses the Golden House in connection with his extravagance; in the latter case, even though he notes that Nero began construction after his first palace had burned down, he completely fails to mention that it did so in the Great Fire. The latter fact was simply not relevant to his topic of extravagance, and so is omitted.

Why did Suetonius choose this non-historical, even anti-historical, format for his biographies, especially when the example of Plutarch shows that a very different format was possible? One influential theory, first propounded by the German scholar Friedrich Leo (*Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1901)), holds that Suetonius and Plutarch represent two fundamentally different traditions of ancient biography: the quasi-historical sort employed by Plutarch was developed by political philosophers to tell the lives of statesmen, whereas the topical sort employed by Suetonius was developed by *grammatici* to provide concise biographical information about poets and writers. Leo argued that Suetonius, who was himself a *grammaticus*, had first used this format appropriately in *On Illustrious Men*, but

had then automatically employed it in *The Twelve Caesars* as well, even though it was not at all suitable for the biographies of rulers.

Leo was certainly right to stress the links between *The Twelve Caesars* and the traditions of 'grammatical' scholarship. The topical arrangement of material in *The Twelve Caesars* is very similar to the format of Suetonius' more strictly grammatical works like *On Insults*; much of the work can be analysed as a series of headings and subheadings, each illustrated by a number of examples. We may illustrate this by two paragraphs from the section in the life of Julius Caesar that deals with his clemency (*Jul.* 73-4). The first begins with the statement that 'when given the chance, he would always cheerfully come to terms with his bitterest enemies', a virtual subheading that is duly illustrated by three examples (Gaius Memmius, Gaius Calvus, Valerius Catullus); the effect of a list is even stronger in the original Latin, in which each sentence begins with the name of the person. The second paragraph opens with another subheading ('even when he did take action, it was his nature to show restraint'), followed this time by four examples, each again beginning with a name (the pirates, Cornelius Phagites, Philemon, Publius Clodius). The organization here is almost identical to that which we find in *On Insults*, and occurs throughout *The Twelve Caesars*: the reader is constantly being confronted with what Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has called 'the unremitting tidiness of the scholar's mind' (*Suetonius: The Scholar and His Caesars* (1983; reprinted Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), p. 201).

Nevertheless, Leo's general thesis about two distinct types of ancient biography is now generally rejected. Many of the reasons have to do with the details of ancient literary history, but one is of importance for any reader of Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*. This is the observation that, far from being unsuited to the biographies of rulers and statesmen, the topical arrangement employed by Suetonius was both traditional and widely familiar. We find it, for example, in the encomium, a speech in praise of a notable figure, particularly a ruler or political leader. Thus the Greek writer Xenophon, in the

encomium of the Spartan king Agesilaus that he wrote about 360 BC, divides his material into two main parts: first, a chronological narrative of Agesilaus' accomplishments, and then an account of his virtues arranged by category (piety, justice, temperance and so forth). Whether or not this work constitutes an actual biography, in organization it is clearly not far removed from, say, Suetonius' life of Julius Caesar.

The Romans, for their part, had a tradition of commemorating the achievements of eminent men in a type of inscription known as an *elogium*, a summary of accomplishments. One of the earliest extant *elogia* is the following, which dates to the third century BC: 'Lucius Cornelius Scipio Barbatus, the child of his father Gnaeus, a brave and wise man, whose appearance matched his abilities perfectly, who was consul, censor and aedile among you; he took Taurasia and Cisauna in Samnium; he subdued all Lucania and took hostages' (*Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* no. 1). Later examples are more elaborate, such as this one honouring one of the emperor Tiberius' most illustrious ancestors: 'Appius Claudius Caecus, son of Gaius, censor, twice consul, dictator, three times *interrex*, twice praetor, twice curule aedile, quaestor, three times military tribune. He captured many forts from the Samnites; he routed the army of the Sabines and Tuscans; he forbade peace from being concluded with King Pyrrhus. In his censorship he built the Appian Way and constructed an aqueduct into Rome; he built the Temple of Bellona' (*Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* no. 54). The tradition of *elogia* was taken to its furthest extreme by Augustus, in the monumental account of his achievements that he composed at the end of his life and had erected outside his tomb (see *Aug.* 101). Despite its considerable length (it runs to some nine pages in modern editions), the main categories that it employs are much the same as those of earlier *elogia*: public offices and honours (sections 4-14); benefactions to the Roman people, including distributions of money (15-18), building projects (19-21) and public entertainments (22-23); and military accomplishments (25-33). As a comparison with the analyses of Suetonius' lives will reveal, many of these categories regularly feature in *The Twelve Caesars*.

Even Suetonius' practice of discussing the emperors' personal qualities and private lives has its parallel in this tradition; the *elogium* of Scipio Barbatus, we may note, mentions not only his bravery and wisdom, but also his imposing appearance. Similarly, Suetonius' friend and benefactor Pliny the Younger, in the encomium of the emperor Trajan that he delivered in AD 100, covers not only the expected topics, such as Trajan's military achievements (*Panegyricus* 12-19), financial generosity (25-9), public entertainments (33), policy reforms (34-43) and building projects (51), but also his hospitality and behaviour at dinner (49.4-8), his pastimes of hunting and sailing (81), and the virtue and modesty of his wife and sister (83-4). These aspects of the emperor's private life, Pliny insists, have significance for his public role: the way an emperor lives his life serves as a model for others (46.6), and the way he spends his leisure time is the best guide to his true character - 'For who is so dissolute that he does not maintain some appearance of sobriety in his public affairs? It is by the activities of our leisure time that we are betrayed. Is it not the case that many previous emperors spent this part of their lives on gambling, fornication and extravagance, thereby substituting the strain of pursuing vice for true relaxation?' (82.9).

If *The Twelve Caesars* is biography, then, it is biography of a very distinctive sort. Whereas Plutarch came close to writing history, Suetonius, building on the traditions of the Greek encomium and the Latin *elogium*, was aiming at providing something very different: a sort of balance sheet, an analytical framework that would allow for a clear assessment of each emperor's relative success or failure. We should remember that, in his career as imperial secretary, Suetonius would have had ample occasion to evaluate the successes and failures of emperors at first hand, and this personal experience no doubt played a part in his choice of format for *The Twelve Caesars*. Contrary to the arguments of Leo, it was a format particularly well suited to accounts of Roman emperors. It was also, perhaps coincidentally, one particularly well suited to Suetonius' distinctive talents as a *grammaticus*.

Although Suetonius wrote his lives as a series, they vary not

only in format but also in substance. We can identify three distinct groups. The lives of Caesar and Augustus are by far the longest and most detailed. Suetonius uses numerous specific examples to illustrate his topics, supplies an abundance of names and circumstantial details, and regularly cites his sources by name. It is also in these lives that we most clearly observe him assessing his sources critically and forming his own judgments; as an example we may note his balanced discussion of the charges of vice brought against Augustus, in which he draws on a variety of evidence both pro and con (*Aug.* 68-71). The next four lives, in contrast, Tiberius to Nero, are noticeably less rich. References to specific sources are fewer and largely limited to the Augustan period, and, although anecdotes are duly supplied to illustrate the various subtopics, precise details are often lacking. At times we can catch Suetonius apparently making a broad generalization on the basis of a single known incident (see for example his comment on virgins being raped before being executed at *Tib.* 61). He also seems to rely more heavily on received opinion and be less concerned with forming an independent judgement. The last six lives, Galba to Domitian, are much shorter and at times almost perfunctory. This is perhaps to be expected in the case of the short-lived emperors of the year AD 69, but it is surprising in the case of such a major figure as Vespasian; as for the life of Titus, it hardly counts as a biography at all. That of Domitian provides something of a return to the standards of the middle lives, but is still far less vivid and detailed than we might expect, especially given that Suetonius is writing about the events of his own lifetime; it is worth noting that he devotes only slightly more space to the fifteen-year reign of Domitian than he does to the seven-month reign of Galba.

This steady decline has provoked considerable discussion. One hypothesis explains it in terms of Suetonius' own career: Suetonius wrote the first two lives and did incidental research for the next four while he was in charge of the emperor's correspondence and had access to the imperial archives; after his dismissal by Hadrian, he was cut off from this resource but carried on with his project as best he could, even though he

understandably lost some of his enthusiasm for it. As attractive as this hypothesis is, it is probably not correct. Close study of Suetonius' sources shows that most of them would have been readily available in the public libraries of Rome. The documentary source most frequently exploited by Suetonius, the correspondence of Augustus, must not have been difficult to access, since Quintilian also cites it (*Institutio Oratoria* 1.6.19, 1.7.22) and Pliny the Elder implies that documents in Augustus' own hand were fairly commonplace (*Natural History* 13.83). In fact it appears that Suetonius was simply more interested in the life and times of Julius Caesar and Augustus. An examination of *On Illustrious Men* indicates that he included in that work numerous figures from the period of Caesar and Augustus, significantly fewer from the early empire, and fewer still from the Flavian period; for example, the section on poets had entries for very minor writers of the first century BC such as Furius Bibaculus, Cornificius and Quintius Atta, but apparently omitted even such important Flavian poets as Statius, Silius Italicus and Martial. It is therefore likely that the varying quality of the lives of the emperors reflects not so much the availability of material as a bias in Suetonius' scholarly interests.

How should we assess the overall value of *The Twelve Caesars*? Most historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who were chiefly interested in constructing a narrative of major political and military events, tended to dismiss Suetonius' work with scorn. There is good reason for this. As I discussed above, his particular style of biography led him to ignore much that was relevant to these topics; moreover, such details as he does provide are often wrenched from their context and thus stripped of historical significance. Apart from establishing the emperors' dates of birth and death, on which he often lavished considerable care, he had little interest in precise chronology, so that his chronological indications are usually vague and sometimes downright misleading. Obscurities and distortions like these, however, are simply the by-products of Suetonius' chosen approach to his topic. In terms of specific data, Suetonius maintains a fairly high level of accuracy, at least insofar as we can check them against other sources; actual

'Suetonius, in holding up a mirror to those
Caesars of diverting legend, reflects not only
them but ourselves: half-tempted creatures,
whose great moral task is to hold in balance
the angel and the monster within'

GORE VIDAL

As private secretary to the Emperor Hadrian, the scholar Suetonius had access to the imperial archives and used them (along with eyewitness accounts) to produce one of the most colourful biographical works in history. *The Twelve Caesars* chronicles the public careers and private lives of the men who wielded absolute power over Rome, from the foundation of the empire under Julius Caesar and Augustus to the decline into depravity under Nero and the recovery that came with his successors. This masterpiece of observation, immortalized in Robert Graves's classic translation, presents us with a gallery of vividly drawn – and all too human – individuals.

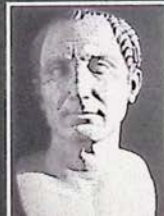
P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

Translated by Robert Graves

Revised with an Introduction and Notes by James B. Rives



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Caesar, 1st century BC, in the Museo e
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