SUETONIUS: BIRTH, DISGRACE AND DEATH

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The calculations of Macé led that scholar to assign Suetonius' birth to 69 or 70, a conclusion approved by the Loeb and Budé editors, also by Townend.[1] Syme pronounced that the biographer 'cannot have been born later than 72: perhaps a few years earlier, but not many'.[2] The limits 70–75 are preferred by Della Corte and Sherwin-White, for which the latter was duly chided by C. P. Jones, who asserts that 67–72 is a 'wiser' bet.[3] Mommsen's antique and aberrant notion of 77 seems (rightly) to have lapsed.[4]

All calculations of the natal year have to be based on two categories of evidence: Suetonius' own statements, and the references in Pliny. The biographer himself is occasionally disposed towards dropping a hint. Perpend the following:

(a) *sed avum meum narrantem puer audiebam, causam operis ab interioribus aulicis proditam* (Caligula's motive for bridging the gulf of Baiae) . . . (*Cal.* 19. 3).

(b) *illud quoque a maioribus natu audiebam* (clashes between Claudius and lawyers) . . . (*Claud.* 15. 3).

(c) *me quidem adulescentulo, repeto quendam Principem nomine alternis diebus declamare, alternis disputare, nonnullis vero mane disserere, post meridiem remoto pulpito declamare solitum. audiebam etiam memoria patrum quosdam e grammatici statim ludo transisse in forum atque in numerum praestantissimorum patronorum receptos* (*De gramm.* 4).

(d) *denique cum post viginti annos adulescente me exstitisset condicionis incertae qui se Neronem esse iactaret* . . . (*Nero* 57. 2).

(e) *interfuisse me adulescentulum memini, cum a procuratore frequentissimoque consilio inspiceretur nonagenarius senex, an circumsectus esset* (*Dom.* 12. 2).

(f) *poemata eius etiam praelegi memini, confici vero ac proponi venalia non tantum operose et diligenter sed inepte quoque* (*Vita Lucani*).

1. A. Macé, *Essai sur Suétone* (Paris, 1900), 35–43; J. C. Rolfe, Loeb, vol. 1 (1913), ix; H. Ailloud, Budé, vol. 1 (1961), ii; G. B. Townend, 'The Hippo Inscription and the Career of Suetonius', *Historia* 10 (1961), 99f.; id., 'Suetonius and his Influence', in *Latin Biography* (London, 1967), 79f.

2. *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 778.

3. F. Della Corte, *Suetonio eques Romanus* (2nd edit., Florence, 1967); A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford, 1966), 127; C. P. Jones, *Phoenix* 22 (1968), 111f. (see especially 129). Jones, in the course of his valuable if sometimes excessive critique of Sherwin-White, prefers the limits 67–72.

4. 'Zur Lebensgeschichte des Jüngeren Plinius', *Hermes* 3 (1869), 31–139 (see especially 43); see Ailloud, *loc. cit.*, for other estimates ranging from 71 on.

(g) *interfuit huic bello pater meus Suetonius Laetus tertiae decimae legionis tribunus angusticlavius. is mox referre crebro solebat* (Otho's detestation of civil war) . . . (*Otho* 10. 1).

There is a small harvest to be reaped here. Suetonius was a *puer* when exposed to the privileged memories of his grandfather concerning Caligula's intimate obsessions. At an unspecified age or ages, he heard old men recollect amusing tales of Claudius' endless problems with lawyers, and his father's favourite theme of Otho's loathing of civil war. He can recall from his own experience some memorable readings from the poetry of Lucan. He was *adulescens* in 88, *adulescentulus* in the last years of Domitian.

Nowhere else does Suetonius argue from his own experiences or recollections. The grandfather and the father (nor, for that matter, the *maiores natu* of the Claudian era) are appealed to in no other contexts. This may be odd. A boy or youth might reasonably weary of iteration of the topics of Caligula's bridge and Othonian scruple, but grandfather and father alike ought to have had many memories that would intrigue a lad and be remembered in the later years of biographical composition. It is observable that a lucky streak ran through the family. A grandfather who could survive Caligula and the remaining Julio–Claudians, a father whose military adherence to a losing faction in the civil strife did not prove fatal: not singular, but striking. It may be thought that the luck ran out with the biographer's eclipse under Hadrian, if there is any truth in this tale. Or perhaps not; for Suetonius Tranquillus did survive the wrath of that capricious ruler, unlike some.

These isolated references are clues to the birth date of the biographer. Perhaps they were inserted as such. A grandfather dating back to the time of Caligula, *maiores natu* with eye-witness accounts of Claudius, a father participant in the struggles of 69, all may accumulate into belief that Suetonius himself had no pre-Flavian memories. His stated recollections of the false Nero of 88 and of Domitianic inquisitions seem to accord with this.

So also the passage concerning Princeps the *grammaticus*. This worthy has no independent attestation; one may risk the casual comment that his name was designed to stick in the mind of an imperial biographer. However that may be, the attendant discussion centres upon the decline of old-fashioned education into hurried and superficial trendiness. A conventional jeremiad, true; but one that exactly suits the Flavian era.[5] Lucan, too, fits into this pattern. It is no surprise that he was to be one of the biographer's subjects. His verse had a considerable impact on Quintilian and Tacitus;[6] in the latter's *Dialogus*, Aper is made to bracket him with Horace and Vergil.[7]

So far, all is good and predictable. A boyhood and young man's years passed under the Flavians is a familiar conclusion which I have no particular

5. Tacitus, *Dial.* 28f. (Messalla on the defects of modern education).
6. See Syme, *Tacitus*, 142–3, for Tacitus and Lucan.
7. *Dial.* 20: *poeticus decor . . . ex Horati et Vergilii et Lucani sacrario prolatus.*

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11. e.g. Cicero, *De Or.* 2. 2. 8 (Crassus at 34); *Phil.*
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12. Sallust, *Cat.* 49. 2 (Caesar at 37); Cicero, *Ad F*
13. On this, see P.K. Marshall, *art. cit.*; also, J. C.
(1927), xiii.
14. See K. H. Waters, 'The Character of Domitian'
15. Compare the pejorative application of 'boy'
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16. With the aid of A. A. Howard & C. N. Jackson
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17. *JC* 56. 7; *Tib.* 68. 1; *Claud.* 2. 1.
18. *Dom.* 1. 1.
19. *Tib.* 7. 1.

desire to overthrow. Unfortunately, some generally unnoticed or ignored problems subsist.

Few things are more irritating about the Romans than their vague and inconsistent terminologies regarding age. Neither in theory nor in practice was there any agreed usage. Varro is said to have placed the age of *adulescentia* between the fifteenth and thirtieth years of a person's life.[8] Aulus Gellius, the reconstruction of whose own career is bedevilled by these same perplexities, consecrates an article in the *Noctes Atticae* to the military classifications of Servius Tullius.[9] It is asserted, on the authority of Aelius Tubero, that one was a *puer* up to the age of seventeen, a *iunior* to forty-six, and a *senior* beyond.

These formulations from Varro and Tubero are not entirely in conflict, but they are immediate reminders of Roman imprecision. Consultation of a sound dictionary[10] discloses that Roman writers, especially those of the late Republic, applied the term *adulescens* to men in their thirties and even forties.[11] There is identical flexibility over *puer* and *adulescentulus*.[12] Incidentally, the exact distinction between *adulescens* and *adulescentulus* is often blurred: not, by now, a surprising revelation. However, it is safe to say that the latter term can imply scorn or self-deprecation.[13] Suetonius may well have applied the epithet to himself with some care in the Domitianic context. For, like so many of those who prospered and wrote under Nerva and Trajan, he will sometimes have found it necessary to explain his survival of the 'terror' under Domitian.[14] *Adulescentulus* serves to mitigate his rôle, bystander's or worse, in the interrogation of the nonagenarian suspect. Even when all due allowance has been made for the emotional application of such terms to oneself or to others,[15] there is a difficulty which has to be faced.

The biographer's own usage of these terms calls for scrutiny.[16] He frequently insists on the difference between *pueritia* and *adulescentia*;[17] as a variant for the former, *pubertas* is once employed. Once, and only once, which may be significant, for the subject is Domitian.[18] In one passage,[19] *adulescentia* is

8. *Apud* Censorinus 14.
9. *NA* 10. 28; see P. K. Marshall, 'The Date of Birth of Aulus Gellius', *CP* 58 (1963), 143f.
10. For this purpose (and for others) Lewis & Short are superior to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.
11. e.g. Cicero, *De Or.* 2. 2. 8 (Crassus at 34); *Phil.* 2. 44. 113 (Brutus and Cassius at 40); ibid., 46. 118 (himself in the *annus mirabilis* of 63).
12. Sallust, *Cat.* 49. 2 (Caesar at 37); Cicero, *Ad Fam.* 12. 25. 4 (Octavian as *puer*).
13. On this, see P.K. Marshall, *art. cit.*; also, J. C. Rolfe's Loeb edition of Gellius, vol. 1 (1927), xiii.
14. See K. H. Waters, 'The Character of Domitian', *Phoenix* 18 (1964), 49f.
15. Compare the pejorative application of 'boy' to Negroes of any age by prejudiced Whites.
16. With the aid of A. A. Howard & C. N. Jackson, *Index Verborum C. Suetoni Tranquilli* (Harvard, 1922).
17. *JC* 56. 7; *Tib.* 68. 1; *Claud.* 2. 1.
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defined as commencing with the assumption of the *toga virilis*; in another,[20] a distinction between the *adulescens* and the *praetextatus* is urged. Also, phrases such as *initio adulescentiae*[21] and *a prima adulescentia*[22] suggest that Suetonius was aware of the problems involved in trying to define maturity or equate behaviour and age.

Suetonius seems not to describe himself anywhere as *iuvenis*, though he has such concepts as *prima iuventa* of others.[23] It is not claimed that this detail is very striking; nor would it have done anything to assist the enquiry into his date of birth, had he employed the word. Still, one cannot help remembering that Tacitus described himself as *iuvenis admodum* in the Flavian setting of the *Dialogus*.[24]

At the other end of the mortal scale, there is no obvious suggestion that the biographer was a *senex* at the time of composition of the extant works. Unless, that is, one regards reminiscence of one's schooldays and youth as the prerogative of the old. I do not.

One passage is signal. We are informed that Augustus *externa bella duo omnino per se gessit, Delmaticum adulescens adhuc et Antonio devicto Cantabricum*.[25] This ought to allude to Octavian's campaigns of 35–34 BC. If so, and if Suetonius is not mistaken in his chronology, this means that the biographer could use *adulescens* of a man aged twenty-eight or so. Such a usage is not in itself irrational, and it accords with Varronian definition and Republican practice. But it follows inescapably that the reference to the false Nero of 88 (appearing when Suetonius was *adulescens*) cannot be used as a basis for assigning the biographer's birth to 69/70. He could have been born up to a decade earlier.

There is a cognate matter here, not usually recognized as a possible complication. It concerns the above-cited reference to Suetonius' father in the *Otho*. Having stated that Laetus was present at the battle of Bedriacum, his son recollects the frequent paternal descantings upon Otho's hatred of civil dissension: *is mox referre crebro solebat* . . .

It is notable that Suetonius does not refer to himself as *puer, adulescens, adulescentulus*, or anything else in this case. One readily accepts that the paternal memoirs could have extended over a period of years. The point is, how should one translate *mox*? If, as one is educated to believe, it means 'soon' or 'presently', consternation may result. For, however obsessed Laetus may have been by his Othonian theme, it is difficult to believe that he would have addressed his diatribes to an infant or toddler. An old soldier needs a

20. *De gramm.* 16.
21. *Vita Lucani* 1.
22. *Otho* 2. 1; cf. *Vit.* 3. 2. The phrase, if a model need be sought, is Ciceronian: *Ad Fam.* 1. 9. 23.
23. *Aug.* 68.
24. *Dial.* 1.
25. *Aug.* 20.

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27. Sherwin-White, 140.

more receptive audience than that. Yet this is what we would have to credit, for Laetus is recalling an event of 69 to a son whose birth has been placed in that year or the next. Thus, we may now have a second reason for suggesting that the biographer was born several years earlier than 69.

No impasse here; there is a way out. *Mox* can be used to mean *post* or *postea*, and there is at least one passage in Suetonius where it is so employed, though it is not the one given as an example (sometimes as *the* example) in some dictionaries.[26] But the point, in spite of this escape route, may enhance the fragility of the usual basis for claiming 69 or 70 as Suetonius' birth date.

Which is, in a way, a pity. For 69 in particular is so beautifully appropriate. Not only was it the year of his father's enduring memory, but the season in which the Roman empire was rescued from anarchy by the Flavians. The dramatic opening of the *Vespasian* makes clear the feelings of Suetonius Tranquillus: *rebellione trium principum et caede incertum diu et quasi vagum imperium suscepit firmavitque tandem gens Flavia, obscura illa quidem ac sine ullis maiorum imaginibus, sed tamen rei publicae nequaquam paenitenda, constet licet Domitianum cupiditatis ac saevitiae merito poenas luisset.*

The force and sincerity of the tribute are not much spoiled by the ritual condemnation of Domitian and the fact that Suetonius was himself in no special position to sneer at the humble origins of another. But if the biographer was born in this momentous year, he resisted all temptation to expatiate upon the coincidence.

Time now to turn to the correspondence of Pliny. His letters yield no firm evidence as to the natal year of Suetonius. All in all, there are four letters addressed to Suetonius, and he is the subject of two more; of the latter, one is a petition on his behalf to Trajan, and is supplemented by the imperial reply.

A meagre and unhelpful collection. Yet they do offer scope for sober speculation, and drop both facts and hints about the biographer's career and character. Relevant to the present quest are the two letters in which Pliny is cast in his common rôle of soliciting favours for a good friend, addressing precise requests to third parties.

The first (*Ep.* 1. 24) informs a certain Baebius Hispanus that Suetonius wishes to buy an *agellus* from a friend of Baebius, and the hope is expressed that Baebius will ensure a fair price. Both the date and addressee are doubtful.[27]

Suetonius is described in the opening words of the note as *Tranquillus contubernalis meus*. It is always possible that the implied relationship is exaggerated for the purpose of persuading Baebius. One reads and writes too many letters of reference or testimonial these days to be untouched by cynicism.

26. *Aug.* 47 (Augustus having no chance, after the defeat of Sextus Pompeius, to visit Africa and Sardinia); *Nero* 6. 2 (*intuens Claudium patruum suum, a quo mox principe Nero adoptatus est*), often cited, is not relevant. *Mox* covers the period 37–41, and does not (as the word order shows) refer precisely to Nero's adoption.

27. Sherwin-White, 140.

It is further stated that Suetonius requires *vicinitas urbis, opportunitas viae, mediocritas villae, modus ruris qui avocet magis quam distringat.* So do we all!

The other letter (*Ep.* 10. 94) is from Pliny in Bithynia to Trajan, requesting the *ius trium liberorum* for Suetonius, for the latter's marriage is so far *parum felix*. In a typically brief response, the *princeps* grants the petition.

Suetonium Tranquillum, probissimum honestissimum eruditissimum virum, et mores eius secutus et studia iam pridem, domine, in contubernium adsumpsi, tantoque magis diligere coepi quanto hunc propius inspexi. Such is the ecstatic testimonial with which the letter opens. Pliny had to lay on the colours thickly, since Trajan was sparing with such grants.[28]

In both of the testimonial letters produced by Pliny in favour of Suetonius, the relationship between the pair is one of *contubernium*. Given its flexibility of meaning and nuance, the term is a nuisance; as is true of the cognate *contubernalis*. However, other letters of Pliny serve to clarify the epistolographer's usage.

First, the detailed recommendation of Voconius Romanus to Priscus (*Ep.* 2. 13). This character has a good deal in common with Suetonius. He was of equestrian family, trained for the bar, a man of letters, and the holder of a priesthood. And he is another person for whom Pliny acquires the *ius trium liberorum* from a sparing emperor. In view of all this, it is no surprise to find him styled as *contubernalis* of Pliny. But in this case there is a temporal connotation, for he and Pliny were close friends as fellow students; their relationship is summed up as *iuvenis iuveni.*[29]

A further letter (*Ep.* 10. 4), this time a solicitation on Romanus' behalf from Pliny to Trajan, enhances the point. Pliny describes Voconius as *ab ineunte aetate condiscipulus et contubernalis.*

Subjoin the letter of patronage to Romatius Firmus (*Ep.* 1. 19), which commences thus: *municeps tu meus et condiscipulus et ab ineunte aetate contubernalis.* Plinian stock phrases, it will now be concluded. Of almost equal interest is the continuation of the above sentence, which defines the relationship between Firmus' father and Pliny: *mihi etiam quantum aetatis diversitas passa est, familiaris.* There is an impression here of some formality of vocabulary in matters of personal relationships and relative age groups. It is also worth observing that Romatius Firmus recurs in a subsequent letter (*Ep.* 4. 29) as a *iudex selectus*, a position which Suetonius seems (from the Hippo inscription) almost certain to have held.

In view of the above letters, it may be suggested with both trepidation and legitimacy that *contubernalis* in Pliny, especially in letters of reference, connotes closeness in age between himself and his protégés. Thus, the natal year of

28. Trajan's reply began: *quam parce haec beneficia tribuam . . .*; cf. the highly relevant *Ep.* 2. 13. 8, where Nerva is equally *parcus* with this particular boon.

29. *Ep.* 2. 13. 8; see Sherwin-White, 173f., for Voconius and the problems associated with this letter.

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30. See, of course, Syme's *Ammianus and*
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31. *Tacitus*, 779–80; *Emperors and Biogr*

32. Syme, *Emperors and Biography*, *loc.*

33. *De gramm.* 16.

Suetonius might have to be pushed back to round about 61/62, the time of Pliny's own birth. At the very least, it is patent that a patron must not be presumed to be much older than his protégé, Any notions that the letters addressed by Pliny to Suetonius betray the impatient wisdom of age over youthful inexperience may have to be abandoned.

We have toiled long and hard to produce the possibility that Suetonius was born as early as 61 or 62. *Parturiunt montes . . .*? Perhaps. And perhaps not. The computation of Macé is exposed as dangerously vulnerable, hardly warranting its near orthodoxy in current scholarship.

The matter is now set aside, to make way for a more notorious matter in the Suetonian *curriculum vitae*: his alleged eclipse under Hadrian for impropriety towards the empres Sabina.

The sole source for this business is 'Spartianus', author of the first biography in the *Historia Augusta*[30]: a dismal state of affairs. The story runs as follows:

Septicio Claro, praefecto praetorii, et Suetonio Tranquillo epistularum magistro, multisque aliis, quod apud Sabinam uxorem iniussu eius familiarius se tunc egerant quam reverentia domus aulicae postulabat, successores dedit, uxorem etiam ut morosam et asperam dimissurus, ut ipse dicebat, si privatus fuisset.

Where to begin? First, assume that the story is true. Where and when did this disgrace befall Septicius, Suetonius, and the other victims? It might have taken place in Britain. However, Syme, the architect of that theory, has modified it over the course of his work on the problems of the *HA*.[31] This is the least of our worries. The date is more to the point. The *HA* inserts the tale into the account of Hadrian in Britain. There is no guarantee that it is in the right place.[32] The anecdote is developed into a timeless discussion of Hadrian's paranoia. Other stories are grafted on, all involving unnamed characters, and all impossible to locate at any particular period in the reign.

The tale in itself is credible, insofar as it conforms to the picture of Hadrian as developed by 'Spartianus'. Dio's account of the emperor is also in accord. But there is little in the *HA* that can be taken on unsupported trust, and the present item is vulnerable.

For one thing, the story could have been concocted out of Suetonius' own writings. The latter has a very similar story of the *grammaticus* Q. Caecilius Epirota: *cum filiam patroni nuptam M. Agrippae doceret, suspectus in ea et ob hoc remotus.*[33] Whilst it is quite possible that both tales are separate and true, it is equally possible that 'Spartianus' would have been tempted to rework one of Suetonius' anecdotes against him.

30. See, of course, Syme's *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (Oxford, 1968) and *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford, 1971).
31. *Tacitus*, 779–80; *Emperors and Biography*, 114–5.
32. Syme, *Emperors and Biography*, *loc. cit.*; Townsend, *art. cit.*, 107f.
33. *De gramm.* 16.

Next, the phraseology. It has often been observed that the title *magister epistularum* is an anachronism. *Reverentia domus aulicae* also sounds like a later formula. It crops up again in the biography of Marcus Aurelius by 'Julius Capitolinus'.[34] Observe further that the expression *successorem dare* is a favourite of the *HA*;[35] it may be significant that it was employed to describe the elevation of Septicius. The anecdote is a regular patchwork of recurrent phrases and motifs.

There is a textual matter, too. *Iniussu eius* is a correction of *uniussu eius*. Some editors have preferred *in usu eius*.[36] It makes a difference. And in either case, to whom does the *eius* refer?

This is no idle question. It tends to be assumed that it was Hadrian who was upset at the liberties taken by his officials. At the same time, surprise is expressed that Hadrian, of all people, should be so concerned with the niceties of court etiquette. The image does not fit an emperor who was *in conloquiis etiam humillimorum civilissimus*.[37]

Hadrian was certainly a fractious personality, often at odds with men of letters. To this extent, the story rings true. But there seems to be something wrong with the logic of the anecdote. For if Hadrian was upset at his officials taking liberties with Sabina, why is it stated that he would have liked to get rid of her at the same time?

The *HA*, admittedly, is not famous for its attention to logic. The difficulty can be met by assuming that the professed reason for the dismissal of Septicius, Suetonius, and the many others involved was not the real one. If it is the case that the emperor was too timid or too much in awe of Sabina to dismiss her, it is quite feasible that he had to wait and cast around for an excuse to get rid of a praetorian prefect and an imperial secretary.

A word on the ultimate fate of Sabina is pertinent. The sources are discrepant. The *HA* has her deceasing amidst rumours of poisoning by her imperial husband.[38] The version of the later Epitomist is that Hadrian openly drove Sabina to suicide *prope servilibus iniuriis*.[39] This settles nothing, but may further weaken belief in 'Spartianus'.

The theme of Hadrian's fickle nature and his constant rounding upon those whom he had raised to high office as later resumed by the *HA*.[40] Three names are given as examples: Attianus, Nepos, and Septicius Clarus. The reference to Attianus here is not easy to reconcile with previous comments on his

34. *MA* 5. 7.
35. See the examples assembled in C. Lessing, *Scriptorum Historiae Augustae Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1906).
36. Peter, after Petschenig. Hohl's Teubner has *in[i]us[s]u eius*.
37. *HA*, *Hadrian* 20. 1.
38. *Hadrian* 23. 9.
39. *Epit.* 14. 8; see W. Den Boer, *Some Minor Roman Historians* (Leiden, 1972), 61.
40. *Hadrian* 15. 3.

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41. *Hadrian*, 8. 7; 9. 4.
42. *Hadrian* 9. 9; 19. 5; see Syme, *Ta*
43. Dio 69. 11. 4.
44. *Aug.* 7. 1.

n observed that the title *magister domus aulicae* also sounds like a iography of Marcus Aurelius by the expression *successorem dare* is it that it was employed to describe a regular patchwork of recurrent

s a correction of *uniussu eius*. Some s a difference. And in either case,

imed that it was Hadrian who was the same time, surprise is expres- so concerned with the niceties of peror who was *in conloquiis etiam*

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attention to logic. The difficulty son for the dismissal of Septicius, s not the real one. If it is the case in awe of Sabina to dismiss her, t around for an excuse to get rid ary.

pertinent. The sources are dis- t rumours of poisoning by her Epitomist is that Hadrian openly s.[39] This settles nothing, but may

is constant rounding upon those umed by the *HA*.[40] Three names Septicius Clarus. The reference with previous comments on his

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an Historians (Leiden, 1972), 61.

relationship with Hadrian.[41] The illustrious career of Platorius Nepos under Trajan and in the early years of Hadrian is familiar. Septicius Clarus is a little out of place in such company. Another small reason, perhaps, for doubting the tale of social impropriety to an empress and dismissals.

If we wish to retain the story, accept the reading *iniussu eius*, and acquit 'Spartianus' of illogicality, there may be a remedy. This is to take *eius* as referring to Sabina, not Hadrian. The situation would then be that Hadrian dismissed the errant officials under pressure from Sabina. Such an interpretation better explains why Sabina is *uxorem morosam et asperam*, why Hadrian would have liked to send her packing at the same time, and why their own relationship ultimately collapsed. It also removes the seeming peculiarity of Hadrian's anger at a breach of court etiquette.

Why, it will fairly be asked, should Hadrian go in so much awe of Sabina? The answer is to be found in other relevant imperial ladies. Matidia, the emperor's mother-in-law, had been consecrated and laden with honours upon her death in 119.[42] The formidable and awkward Pompeia Plotina was on the scene up to 122 or 123; it was she who had urged the wedding of Hadrian and Sabina. Plotina was too dangerous for Hadrian to offend, because of the enduring scandals about her rôle in Hadrian's adoption by Trajan. Plotina was a dowager to be placated – or poisoned.

It may reasonably be assumed that the imperial women stuck together, out of mutual interest if not affection, for Hadrian was neither uxorious nor specially fond of women. True, Matidia and Plotina are honoured, and Sabina endured for a long season. But in the midst of all the commemorations of the youth Antinous, what men recalled most was that Hadrian had failed to honour his own sister, Domitia Paulina, at her death.[43] In sum, if Plotina was still alive in that period of the year 122 when Sabina made her presumed complaint about Septicius and Suetonius, the emperor will naturally have felt he must give way to his shrewish and morose consort. Especially if he had left them all in Italy whilst he was off in Britain.

This interpretation of the tale in the *HA* would lead to some drastic rethinking about the relationship between Hadrian and Suetonius after 122. It could no longer be assumed that the biographer had not further access to the imperial archives; a sympathetic *princeps* might well have allowed the biographer continued use of them. Thus, theories about which of the lives are pre-122 and which post-122 would lose much of their meaning.

Continuation of good terms between Hadrian and Suetonius may be needed to account for the statuette of the young Augustus, which Suetonius gave to the emperor.[44] The biographer writes: *quae dono a me principi data inter*

41. *Hadrian*, 8. 7; 9. 4.
42. *Hadrian* 9. 9; 19. 5; see Syme, *Tacitus*, 246.
43. Dio 69. 11. 4.
44. *Aug.* 7. 1.

cubiculi lares colitur. The present tense is striking. If Hadrian is the emperor in question, and if there had been a breach in 122, why is the reference left in, or at least not amended from the present? Of course, the emperor might be Trajan, a belief which would import some rather obvious consequences for the chronology of Suetonius' career and the composition of his biographies.

Finally, a word on the death of Suetonius. One can only speculate, in default of any real evidence. First, the notorious reference to Domitia Longina in the *Titus: sed nullam habuisse persancte Domitia iurabat, haud negatura, si qua omnino fuisset, immo etiam gloriatura, quod illi promptissimum erat in omnibus probris* (10. 2). The item under discussion is the one mysterious deed of Titus which he regretted.

It has been thought that the tone of this allusion, along with the imperfect tense employed, implies that Domitia was dead by the time this was written.[45] Various documentary evidences[46] suggest that the lady was alive at least as late as 126, and perhaps as late as 130. However, neither tense nor tone really point this way.[47] The attitude was safe enough, for the widow of Domitian had no power or influence after 96, and not too surprising in Suetonius, who strikingly declines to commemorate the deeds of her famous father, Domitius Corbulo. As for the tense, a perfect parallel to this use of the imperfect was produced by Townend,[48] who cites *Dom.* 17. 2: *hoc amplius narrabat* (of a witness to Domitian's murder).

Second, there is the business of Suetonius' apparent tenure of the pontificate of Vulcan at Ostia. Acceptance of this would appear to yield 128 as the year by which the biographer must be dead, since this pontificate was apparently held for life, and A. Egrilius Plarianus is found installed in it by his consulate of this year.[49] However, Meiggs, the chief proponent of all this, does not allow for the possibility that Suetonius, if he really was dismissed by Hadrian from his secular offices in 122, may have been compelled to surrender his priesthood at the same time; or that he would have found it prudent to retire.

Last, some have held that a goodly amount of time must be left to Suetonius after 122, to allow for the composition of his multifarious works.[50] This is unnecessary. Since we know nothing about the biographer's speed in research and composition (the reluctance to publish one item, as attested in a vague letter of Pliny, is another matter), it is impossible to say how long his writings took. Nor should it be overlooked that much of his scholarly work could have been completed in the earlier part of his life, when he was best known as a *scholasticus*, before the days of his secretarial eminence.

45. Syme, *Tacitus*, 780; *id.*, 'Domitius Corbulo', *JRS* 60 (1970), 39.
46. Syme, *Tacitus*, 780, for the tiles with consular names.
47. Thus G. W. Bowersock, 'Suetonius and Trajan', *Hommages Rénard* 1 (Brussels, 1969), 123.
48. 'The Date of Composition of Suetonius' *Caesares*', *CQ* NS 9 (1959), 293.
49. R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (Oxford, 1960), 514f.
50. As does, for instance, Funaioli in his RE article on the biographer.

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1. This essay is a shortened version o
Bloemfontein in January 1975.