Suetonius and the Minor Historians

LIFE AND EVIDENCE

We do not know the exact year of Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus's birth or of his death. On the basis of the meager autobiographical indications that he provides us with (we get other details from Pliny the Younger's correspondence, the *Historia Augusta,* and an inscription discovered several decades ago), we can only suppose that he was born shortly after A.D. 70 to an equestrian family of modest condition (nothing certain is known about the place of his birth). For a while he must have engaged in legal work. Later—when he had already begun to devote himself to learned studies—thanks to the patronage of influential people, at first Pliny the Younger, then Septicius Clarus, he entered the court as an official. At first he was put in charge of the public libraries by Trajan (which would confer upon him the *ius trium liberorum*); later, under Hadrian (117–38), he was employed on the imperial archives and the correspondence of the princeps himself, an office that would have determined the direction of his researches.

His brilliant bureaucratic career was rudely interrupted in 122, when, along with Septicius Clarus, the praetorian prefect and his patron, he fell into disgrace. After his dismissal from court, all traces of Suetonius are lost; we do not know how much later he died.

WORKS

Our knowledge of his many learned works, in Greek and Latin, is derived not so much from the scanty fragments that are preserved as from the so-called lexicon of the Suda (tenth century), which lists their various titles. Their subjects are diverse, ranging from Roman customs to the calendar, from the diacritical marks used by philologists to famous courtesans, from Cicero's physical defects to his political writings. *Pratum,* or *Prata,* is probably an encyclopedic work, subdivided into different sections on the basis of the subjects treated; according to others, the title designates rather the entire corpus of antiquarian-erudite writings that we have mentioned.

De Viris Illustribus is the title of a collection of biographies of writers subdivided by genres—poets, orators, historians, philosophers, grammarians. We possess only one section, *De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus,* which is damaged at the end. The first twenty-four chapters are devoted to grammarians (i.e., philologists, scholars who work on literary texts) and extend

from Crates of Mallus, the Greek who introduced grammar at Rome, to Valerius Probus; the remaining chapters are the six that alone survive from those devoted to the rhetoricians. Of the other sections we have only scattered material that has come down to us through the indirect tradition. From the *De Poetis,* in particular, are derived the extant lives of several poets, such as Terence, Virgil, Horace, and Lucan; we do not know whether and to what extent these lives were reworked by the compiling authors, such as Donatus and Jerome.

By contrast, the *De Vita Caesarum,* a collection of twelve biographies (of the emperors from Julius Caesar to Domitian) in eight books, is preserved intact, except for the introductory chapters of the first biography and the dedication of the work to Septicius Clarus.

1. BIOGRAPHY IN SUETONIUS

Suetonius's predecessors

Biography was a literary genre of Greek tradition that had been practiced and approved at Rome especially by Varro and Cornelius Nepos. More or less during the same years, both Varro (who was also the author of biographies of poets, now lost) in his *Imagines* and Nepos in his *De Viris Illustribus* had sketched the lives of famous people (distinguished by category—statesmen, military commanders, artists, writers, etc.), using as a basis the same format that Suetonius would follow in his *De Viris Illustribus.* Brief information on origins and place of birth, instruction received, principal interests and works composed, features of character (the last often illustrated through interesting anecdotes or details of private life)—this, approximately, is the model structure for the succinct portraits of grammarians and rhetoricians that Suetonius paints. For the *Lives of the Caesars,* Suetonius's other biographical work, the basis seems to be a similar format. The differences lie only in the activities engaged in (instead of the instruction received, we are told of the various ways the subject exercised power) and in the much larger scale of the imperial biographies. The latter begin with notices relating to the family and the place, date, and circumstances of birth of the princeps. Next a chronological account traces his youthful growth and development up to his accession to power. At this point the chronological arrangement is abandoned for a synchronic description of the various aspects of the emperor's personality, presented under separate headings, which themselves in turn are further subdivided. Then the biography, returning to chronological order, concludes with the death of the princeps and the funerary honors paid to him.

Format of Suetonius's biographies

The rejection of chronological arrangement: the extension of the format of the viri illustres *to the Caesars*

The most significant feature in the organization of the biographical material is thus the rejection of a chronological arrangement that follows the development of the person under discussion. Suetonius himself, in a passage of the *Life of Augustus* (9.1), explains how his exposition proceeds, not *per tempora* but *per species,* that is, by a series of categories, or headings, that deal separately with the various aspects of the princeps' personality. Thus, rather than following a single, linear course and illuminating the

events in the full complexity of the elements that may explain them, the biographer prefers to compose in episodic fragments and to give an analysis that is centered on the person and his private life and character. He places his *virtutes* and his *vitia* under appropriate headings, which has the obvious consequence of orienting judgment along decidedly moral lines. On the basis of these analogies between Suetonius's two biographical works, scholars have come to accept the theory, propounded chiefly by the great philologist F. Leo at the beginning of the century, that Suetonius unwarrantedly extended to the *Caesars* the biographical model he had already used in the *De Viris Illustribus.* This model, according to the theory, had been developed in Alexandria to describe men of culture (poets, philosophers, historians, etc.) and was a type of biography intended for the learned and lacking any artistic pretensions, one in which chronological narrative, since private lives were the subject, naturally did not have the same importance as in a work that treated the personality of a statesman or a military leader. For this second type of biography Greek culture (more exactly, the Aristotelian school) had developed another model, the Plutarchan type (so called because Plutarch, contemporaneously with Suetonius, had given the most outstanding instance of it in his *Parallel Lives*). This type, by virtue of its chronological arrangement of the events, was suited for shedding light on complex, public figures such as great politicians and statesmen; it was the type of biography, that is, that Suetonius ought to have adopted for the *Lives of the Caesars.*

Alexandrian biographies and Plutarchan biographies

Today, however, this theory, which is based on a reconstructed history of the biographical genre in antiquity that cannot be defended and which attributed the ahistorical, fragmentary character of Suetonius's imperial biographies to his familiarity with the Alexandrian biographical format, has come to be replaced by a different evaluation, one that pays more attention to the intrinsic reasons for Suetonius's choices. First of all, Suetonius's adoption of the biographical genre shows his awareness that this is the form of historical writing best suited to explain the new form that power has assumed, the individual, personal form of the principate, and also that the biography of individual emperors is best adapted to periodizing the history of the Empire. In the rejection of the annalistic scheme (i.e., the narrative of events year by year), which senatorial culture had tied to the regular succession of the republican magistrates, one perceives the realistic awareness that those magistracies, though still existing formally, are now a mere fiction and that only the duration of each emperor's reign can articulate the succession of periods. Whereas an earlier age saw the influence of Alexandria as being strongest, the trend today is to note specifically Roman features. The tradition of the *elogia* and of the *laudationes funebres,* which enumerated the civil and military achievements, the services, and the honors of the dead man, seems to show its influence on the way Suetonius selects and arranges the material. The *Res Gestae* of Augustus, which summarizes the offices bestowed on the princeps, the grants to the state, his gifts to the people, the monuments he erected, in short, the various services he

Evolution of the principate and evolution of the format for biography

Suetonius's Roman models: elogia *and* laudationes funebres

performed, constitutes an important example of the impetus that so eminently Roman a tradition could give to the exposition *per species* that we find in Suetonius's *Lives.* Suetonius has a notable tendency to emphasize the private lives of the emperors, which is often deplored as a low taste for gossip. He is fond of describing their excesses and intemperance and dwelling on petty or scandalous details, a tendency that has enhanced the success of the work, since it was read as a handbook of royal perversions. In this tendency one is also inclined to see the manifestation of a desire for objectivity and demystification and of an intention to provide a comprehensive portrait of the person, illuminating all the aspects of both his public and his private life, without falling into encomium and without rejecting the concrete notices the imperial archives made available to him.

Gossip and demystification

A fine example of minor historiography

The result is a kind of minor historiography (minor in comparison with Tacitus's, for instance, according to the canons of aristocratic historiography) that draws on the most varied sources, from archival documents to oral tradition, from satiric pamphlets to earlier historiography, especially of the anti-Caesarean tradition. It also depicts, in some ways, the features of its intended audience, which is to be identified as the equestrian order, to which Suetonius himself belongs and which constitutes the point of view from which the individual episodes are observed and evaluated. An audience of officials and bureaucrats would have appreciated the feeling of concreteness in Suetonius's pages, the curious detail he registers (in the scrupulous spirit of the chancellery), the unpublished document he makes known, and his exposition of the material in a manner that is clear and organized by distinct headings. Such an audience would also have enjoyed Suetonius's sober, laconic language, which is untouched by archaizing affectations and modern preciosities and is open to colloquial turns without failing to be decorous. His is a smooth and nimble style of writing, whose narrative liveliness is the chief recompense for the work's most conspicuous limitations, the greatest of which is the superficiality of the historical and psychological analysis. Although it does not rise to the level of truly great historiography, the *Lives of the Caesars* is nonetheless exceptionally rich in notices and information for the historical reconstruction of the early Empire.

2. LITERARY SUCCESS

Antiquity

It was Suetonius who determined the form of the genre for biographers until at least the eighteenth century. Later biography in antiquity, both pagan *(Historia Augusta)* and Christian (Jerome), depends heavily upon the model of his lives of the Caesars and the *De Viris Illustribus.* His scholarly works apparently also remained popular until the fifth and sixth centuries, when the erudite compilers of late antiquity, such as Censorinus, Servius, Macrobius, Johannes Lydus, and Isidore of Seville, seem to have preferred his writings, which were short, snappy, and above all easy to consult, to Varro's for the history of Roman antiquities.

Middle Ages

Although over two hundred manuscripts of Suetonius are extant, only one seems to have survived the Dark Ages. But he seems to have become a central author during the Carolingian Renaissance (though he did not become a medieval school author); Einhard based his *Vita Karoli Magni* upon Suetonius's life of Julius Caesar and others of his imperial biographies. The ninth century also witnessed the first medieval excerpts from Suetonius, compiled by Heiric of Auxerre and extremely popular in the later Middle Ages. Further excerpts were disseminated as part of the *Florilegium Gallicum* (Orléans, mid-twelfth century). Indeed, most of the traces of his reception during the Middle Ages can be localized in France, in the eleventh century in the Loire Valley, for example, and in a French translation in 1381.

Suetonius was one of Petrarch's favorite authors, which is not surprising in view of Petrarch's intensely personal relation to the individual great men of antiquity. Of the ten surviving fourteenth-century manuscripts, two belonged to him, and he also owned a twelfth-century manuscript. Petrarch also took over Suetonius's model and title for his own *De Viris Illustribus.* Boccaccio also made extensive use of Suetonius as a historical source; a manuscript of excerpts written in his own hand is preserved in Florence. Suetonius's popularity increased through the Renaissance, and although no commentaries were written on him before the late fifteenth century (Domitius Calderinus, Philippus Beroaldus), two *editiones principes* of his works were published in Rome in 1470, and thirteen other editions were printed before 1500. And through the centuries that followed, despite gradual refinement of the methodology of biography and a shift in the interest of professional historians away from the lives of great men, nevertheless, wherever readers have retained an interest in the bizarre excesses of absolute power and in the mixture of the significant, the banal, and the salacious, Suetonius has continued to be read—up to the present day.

Renaissance

3. FLORUS AND THE "BIOGRAPHY OF ROME"

Identification of the author of the Epitome *with the* poeta novellus

The need to reform the traditional historiographic models, or to alter their characteristics, seems to be documented not only by Suetonius but also by the work that is transmitted to us under the title of *Epitoma de Tito Livio Bellorum Omnium Annorum DCC* (in two or four books, according to the manuscripts) and is attributed to Lucius Annaeus (or Julius) Florus. We know very little of the author. The tendency today is to identify him with the Publius Annius Florus who wrote the dialogue *Vergilius Orator an Poeta* (which represents a fashion popular in the rhetorical schools) and with the Annius Florus who, as a friend of Hadrian's, exchanged with that emperor jesting poems of the type dear to the *poetae novelli* (see pp. 588 ff.). We have, then, a single person of African origin (the proem of the above-mentioned dialogue, the only part extant, furnishes us with these meager biographical data), who left Rome in the time of Domitian, was a school-