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London 99

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## ROMAN BIOGRAPHY

### Greek antecedents of Roman biography

Biography, or the writing of a life (Greek: *bios*), gradually became an important literary form in the Greek and Roman world, and it has remained so until our own time. Despite its popularity across the centuries, intellectuals and literary critics have regarded it as a genre inferior to history. Since the earliest biographers were principally concerned with the development of moral character, biography was regarded as primarily ethical and rhetorical, while the writing of history demanded research and analysis. In some eras biography and history might approach each other, and authors like Xenophon and Tacitus wrote in both genres, but with the rise of modern historical scholarship during the nineteenth century biography came to be regarded as a dilettantish avocation for gentlemen rather than scholars. The distinguished philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood called biography "anti-historical." During the last fifty years, however, there has been a growing similarity and, though the Pulitzer Prize Committee maintains separate categories for History and Biography, many scholarly biographies are almost indistinguishable from history and both forms are often written by the same scholars. Scholars, of course, remain scornful of popular biography, but they would be equally scornful of popularized history if it was published in equal measure. It is not, since the book-buying public much prefers biography to history, which encourages many historians to write in a mixed genre – for example, *Woodrow Wilson and his Times* – to reach a wider audience. In the words of Arnaldo Momigliano, "Biography has never been so popular, so respected, so uncontroversial, among scholars as it is now." Those words, written a quarter of a century ago, are even more true today.

In biography, as in most other forms of literature, Rome owed

much to Greece, though perhaps not as much as it might seem at first glance. Plutarch, whose *Parallel Lives* make him the greatest of all ancient biographers, was a Greek, but he lived under the Roman Empire and was a contemporary of the two finest Roman biographers, Suetonius and Tacitus. Thus his work can hardly be regarded as a model for Roman writers. In fact, there is no specific model for Roman biographers, or for Plutarch himself, only a range of Greek biographical writing with quite different purposes and forms. Some scholars would even trace biography back to the *Odyssey*, which recounted the adventures of Odysseus. When Alexander the Great visited the site of ancient Troy, he lamented that he, unlike Achilles, had no poet like Homer to commemorate his deeds, and thus he seemed to regard the *Iliad* as a biography. By the fifth century BCE, the eulogistic songs sung at banquets and funerals in praise of aristocratic achievements were given a literary form by Pindar and other poets who sketched the lives of mythical or historical personalities in their victory odes. At the same time, historians like Herodotus and Thucydides provided brief portraits of Croesus, Themistocles, and Pericles.

It was in the fourth century BCE that Greek biographical writing burst forth in monographs, dialogues, and what we might today call historical novels. These different forms reflected the different goals of the authors. The best known are Plato's *Dialogues* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, which intended to preserve the personality and ideas of their teacher, Socrates. (It is not relevant for our purpose to address what of the philosophy in the *Dialogues* is due to Socrates and what to Plato.) In addition to such philosophical tributes, Xenophon's *Anabasis* includes short lives of dead generals, which Samuel Johnson considered the earliest Greek biographies:

He apprehended that the delineation of *characters* in the end of the first Book of the *Retreat of the Ten Thousand* was the first instance of the kind that was known.

(Boswell, *Life of Johnson* IV 31, 32)

Monographs by Xenophon (*Agésilas*) and the orator Isocrates (*Euagoras*) are prose encomia detailing the achievements and virtues of their subjects, modeled perhaps on the poems of Pindar. Isocrates boasted that his treatment of the Cypriot ruler Euagoras in 365 BCE was the first to eulogize a living person. When Xenophon wrote his *Agésilas* a few years later, he included more factual material and thus brought it closer to biography. While all these works attempted

to keep alive the memory of a notable Greek, Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus* (*Cyropaedia*) was a novelistic treatment of the training of a Persian prince intended to provide a model for aristocratic education. These various forms were used and combined in the histories, biographies, and historical fiction inspired by the extraordinary life and achievements of Alexander, which flourished across much of Europe and Asia for centuries as the "Alexander Romance."

Later in the fourth century, Aristotle and future generations at the Lyceum, the school of what were called the Peripatetic philosophers, developed the theory that an individual's character is fixed, though it might only be gradually revealed during one's life. Thus came the Peripatetic school of biography which sought to identify the character traits present in a given personality and derive moral lessons from them. Aristotle's successor as director of the Lyceum, Theophrastus, even wrote a book (*Characters*) which presented brief sketches of different personality types, while others wrote actual lives in which character was revealed through action. For such a biography, a treatment of the entire life would be unnecessary, so the biographer might select only those anecdotes necessary to illuminate the character and thus illustrate the moral lesson. These writers were erudite researchers who collected material from many sources. Some of their books were mere collections of sayings or anecdotes, which later became a popular literary form in the ancient world. But in other cases they wove this material into a learned life. There was particular interest in the lives of philosophers, in which the ideas of the thinker, his sayings, and anecdotes from his life might be brought together. Collections of such lives, containing generations of teachers and students, became the earliest form of intellectual history among the Greeks. There was less interest in writing the moral biography of men of action: that seemed the province of history proper or a rhetorical encomium like Polybius' lost *Life of Philopoemen*. Polybius says that he had in that monograph described Philopoemen's family and his training as a boy, but he spells out the quite different purpose of his *History*:

It is evident that in the present narrative my proper course is to omit details concerning his early training and the ambitions of his youth, but to add detail to the summary account I gave of the achievements of his riper years, in order that the proper character of each work may be preserved. For just as the former work, being in the form of an encomium, demanded a summary and somewhat exag-

gerated account of his achievements, so the present history, which distributes praise and blame impartially, demands a strictly true account and one which states the ground on which either praise or blame is based.

(*Hist.* 10, 21, 7–8, tr. Paton (Loeb))

No early Peripatetic biographies survive; we know them only from ancient references. But Plutarch of Chaeronea, who wrote much later (about 100 CE), incorporated two of the most important elements of that tradition: research and a moral purpose. His approach was different – not Aristotelian, but Stoic – but an ethical concern lay at the heart of his writing. Shaped by the Stoic tradition, he reoriented Peripatetic biography toward men of action: founders, statesmen, and generals. Since he wrote parallel lives of Greeks and Romans with moralizing comparisons appended, he had to select and highlight elements in the lives that lent themselves to such a comparison. Though he organized his material into a chronological framework not unlike history, he made it clear that biography gave him a freedom that history would not:

I shall make no other preface than to entreat my readers, in case I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men, nor even speak exhaustively at all in each particular case, but in epitome for the most part, not to complain. For it is not History I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likeness in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men, and while I endeavor by these to portray their lives, may be free to leave more weighty matters and great battles to be treated by others.

(Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 1, tr. Perrin (Loeb))

In addition to the encomium and the Peripatetic moral biography, scholars at the Museion, the great research institute at Alexandria, developed a third form of biography that had no political or moral

purpose. Such lives were first written to be included in the scholars' new editions of famous Greek poets. Unlike the previous forms, they were written for purely utilitarian reasons and had little literary merit. The biographer assembled material on a poet's life and works, with anecdotes on his education, travels, etc. The material, which was uncovered through research or deduced from the author's writings, was organized in categories, rather than chronologically. Since the biographers had no rhetorical pretensions, they might quote actual documents rather than rewrite them. These biographies were not intended for the education of statesmen or the literary edification of the sophisticated, but as scholarly collections for those interested in learning the facts quickly and painlessly. With the exception of a papyrus fragment of Satyrus' *Life of Euripides*, only the names of biographers and the titles of their books survive, but some material reaches us through inclusion in later lives of poets.

Greek ideas of biography reached Rome in two ways: directly through the reading of written Greek lives, and indirectly through the schools of rhetoric. The schools provided training, first entirely in Greek and by the first century BCE in Latin as well, in epideictic, or display, oratory through a series of graduated exercises. The exercise for describing the "external excellence" of a character included much of a biographical nature: a character's noble birth and ancestry, native city and family, education and friends, public achievements and the nature of his death. Hence, even before there was written biography in Latin, orators like Cicero were trained to use biography in their speeches. Since no proper biographies survive from the Roman Republic, the long passages in Cicero's speeches that describe his client's background may be regarded as the earliest extant Roman biographical writing.

Rome did not completely depend on Greek models of biography; we have seen that there were independent traditions of funeral orations (*laudationes funebres*), banquet songs, and commemorative inscriptions preserved by aristocratic families. A funeral oration would not only include the decedent's career, but it would rehearse the offices and achievements of his or her notable predecessors. In his funeral oration for his nephew and son-in-law Marcellus, Augustus traced the family back to the third century BCE, as Julius Caesar had done in his oration at the funeral of his aunt Julia, the widow of Marius. These orations depended, to a greater degree than the generalized Greek encomia, on the actual details of the subject's career. There may have been some relation between these biographical orations and the popularity of realistic portraiture during the

late Republic; Plutarch himself links biography with portraiture in the passage from the *Life of Alexander* cited above. While the Greeks preferred more idealized images in stone as in words, the Romans tended to present their ancestors with a greater degree of reality.

The earliest known Roman biography, the eulogistic treatment of Tiberius Gracchus by his brother, Gaius Gracchus, does not survive. After the death of the younger Cato in 46 BCE, Brutus wrote a *Cato*. That this was a political tract rather than a genuine biography is demonstrated by the fact that Caesar himself responded sharply with a pamphlet called *Anti-Cato*. These works, like that of Gracchus and of a later life of Brutus, were in fact political pamphlets. While this form of ideological expression had important consequences in the hagiography of Stoic "martyrs" under the Empire, they were not truly biographies. Nor was Tiro's *Cicero*, an encomiastic life of his master which focused on personal and literary matters rather than politics. According to St Jerome, the first person to write biography at Rome was the learned polymath Marcus Terentius Varro. In addition to brief Alexandrian-style biographies of the Roman poets, he published an enormous work called *Imagines*, which contained the portraits of 700 distinguished Greeks and Romans – poets, philosophers, statesmen, and performers – each accompanied by a brief epigram and explanatory prose material. Whether biography or not, none of these works survives, and the Roman Republic ended without leaving us a single extant biography. It was only during the triumviral period (43–31 BCE) that the earliest surviving Latin biographies were written.

#### Cornelius Nepos' *Lives of Famous Men*

Cornelius Nepos (c. 100–24 BCE), born to a wealthy non-senatorial family in Cisalpine Gaul, wrote the earliest surviving lives. Though he came to Rome by 65 and lived there for forty years, Nepos studiously avoided involvement in the political life of the capital. He was a particular friend and admirer of another political neutral of the age, Atticus, at whose villa he would have met Cicero and Varro. Though the letters between Nepos and Cicero have not survived, they seem to have been concerned with literary matters. He lived through the civil wars and died in old age in 24 BCE.

Nepos realized that, as Rome became more involved with the Greek world, it was important that Romans be better acquainted with Greek history. Highly educated men like Cicero, who had

studied in Greece and read Greek easily, could use Greek historical parallels, but Romans who read only Latin had almost no written material available on foreign peoples and so fell back on the crudest caricatures. Nepos was determined to bring a certain awareness of cultural relativism to Rome:

I doubt not, Atticus, that many readers will look upon this kind of writing as trivial and unworthy of the parts played by great men, when they find that I have told who taught Epaminondas music or see it mentioned among his titles to fame that he was a graceful dancer and a skilled performer on the flute. But such critics will for the most part be men unfamiliar with Greek letters, who will think no conduct proper which does not conform to their own habits. If these men can be made to understand that not all peoples look upon the same acts as honorable or base, but that they judge them all in the light of the usage of their forefathers, they will not be surprised that I, in giving an account of the merits of the Greeks, have borne in mind the usage of that nation.

(Nepos, *De Duc. Illust.* Preface 1–3)<sup>1</sup>

As the first step in this program of introducing Romans to international culture, Nepos prepared a universal history in three books called *Chronica* – a synchronization of the chronologies of Greece and Rome already mentioned in Chapter 1. Though Nepos' book was soon supplanted by a superior single volume by his friend Atticus (*Liber Annalis*), we should not overlook that Nepos first brought comparative history to a wider audience at Rome. It is this book that his friend Catullus playfully invokes when he dedicates his own first book of poetry to Cornelius Nepos:

Who am I giving this smart little book to,  
new, and just polished up with dry pumice?  
Cornelius, you; because you already  
reckoned my scribblings really were something  
when you, alone of Italians, boldly  
unfolded all history in three volumes –  
the effort, my God! and the erudition!  
So have this little book, such as it may be...

(Catullus 1, tr. T.P. Wiseman)

Though some have read these lines as containing biting irony or parody directed toward Nepos, this is probably no more than affectionate teasing between good friends from the same region of northeast Italy.

*Lives of Famous Men* was a collection of biographies comparing foreigners and Romans in various categories; the foreigners are usually Greek, with an occasional Persian or Carthaginian. Nepos organized the work, which was dedicated to Atticus, in sixteen books, with Roman and foreign kings, generals, lawgivers, orators, philosophers, poets, historians, and grammarians. There were perhaps four hundred lives in all, though only twenty-four survive: the book on foreign generals (including Alcibiades and Hannibal) as well as the lives of Cato and Atticus from the book of Roman historians.

Nepos had no intention of writing history; his goal was to introduce his readers to foreign notables and draw moral lessons from their lives. But he was well aware that the ignorance of his readers, whom he refers to as the *vulgus* (crowd), demanded that he provide a certain amount of historical and cultural background.

Pelopidas, the Theban, is better known to historians than to the general public (*vulgus*). I am in doubt how to give an account of his merits; for I fear that if I undertake to tell of his deeds, I shall seem to be writing a history rather than a biography; but if I merely touch upon the high points, I am afraid that to those unfamiliar with Greek literature it will not be perfectly clear how great a man he was. Therefore I shall meet both difficulties as well as I can, having regard both for the weariness and the lack of information of my readers.

(Nepos, *Pelopidas* 1)

These first political biographies to survive from the ancient world are quite varied in size, form, and approach. Most are Peripatetic biographies with a moral message, though some shorter lives (e.g. *Iphicrates*; *Conon*; *Cimon*) are more purely factual in the Alexandrian style. Nepos even uses the encomiastic mode in his *Alcibiades* and *Atticus*. Some lives are mere sketches, but several come alive as the author is engaged by the personality. One such is the life of *Eumenes*, the only Greek general among the Macedonian inner circle of Philip and Alexander and the successor of Alexander who fought the most loyally to preserve his kingdom for his son. Nepos was touched by

that loyalty and his warmth toward Eumenes is palpable. In this biography the author has to explain Eumenes' high position as secretary to Philip II, since at Rome "scribes are considered hirelings."

The most vibrant of the Greek lives is certainly that of *Alcibiades*. Though Nepos usually distrusts strongly individualistic behavior, he is entranced by Alcibiades, of whom he said: "In this man Nature seems to have tried to see what she could accomplish" (1). He provides a wealth of detail on Alcibiades' beauty, intelligence, and charm, though he omits the usual story of his seduction of the wife of the Spartan king. He does not conclude this tempestuous life with a moral – which would have been easy – but continues the eulogistic tone to the very end: "He was held in the first rank wherever he lived, as well as being greatly beloved" (11).

The brief life of Cato, which was included in the book of Roman historians, refers to a much longer life, now lost, which Nepos wrote at the request of Atticus. Since his long life of Cicero is also lost, we must turn to his life of Atticus for the only surviving example of a contemporary biography. This eulogistic life is a fitting commemoration of the friend to whom the entire book was dedicated. Despite a highly rhetorical approach, personal knowledge and obvious sympathy make this by far the best of Nepos' lives. It was published before the death of Atticus in 32 BCE, though Nepos issued a revised version not long before his own death. Much of the material was based on Nepos' own observation as well as conversations with mutual friends, so here Nepos becomes an important primary source for life during the waning decades of the Roman Republic.

Atticus is best known as the friend and correspondent of Cicero, but he was also a friend of Nepos and most of the Roman political leadership for a half-century. What is extraordinary is his success at remaining neutral in civil conflict while keeping up friendly relations with nearly all the combatants: the younger Marius; Sulla; Pompey; Caesar; Cicero; Brutus; Antony; and finally Augustus. This wealthy businessman and scholar retreated to Athens for two decades; when he returned in 65 BCE he remained loyal to his friends as individuals, but refused to be tempted by political office or alliances. Since most of our sources concern political intrigues and grabs for power, the survival of this equestrian at the very center of political life but detached from it provides a fascinating look at the ties that bind the Roman elite even in the midst of civil war. Nepos reports that Atticus lived to see his one-year-old granddaughter, Vipsania, become engaged to the future emperor Tiberius.

The biography provides a wonderful window on late Republican Rome, and it demonstrates that Nepos could, when interested and knowledgeable, write a very interesting biography.

There is little question that Nepos found Atticus so attractive because he too was a scholar rather than a politician. If there is a recurrent theme through Nepos' lives, it is the horror of civil strife and the many vices it encourages, especially greed and profligacy. He introduces the theme of freedom into some lives, like that of the Sicilian general Timoleon, where that theme is absent in Plutarch's version. The civic virtues of freedom, obedience, and communal harmony are given an important role by an author who preferred the quiet, orderly life of the study to the turmoil of the Senate or the Forum. Perhaps the clearest expression of Nepos' anxiety is his frequent return to the role of Fortune in human affairs. As he says of Dion,

This success, so great and so unexpected, was followed by a sudden change, since Fortune, with her usual fickleness, proceeded to bring down the man whom she had shortly before exalted.

(*Dion* 6)

For one who lived through the last five tumultuous decades of the Republic and two decades of civil war, Nepos' resigned acceptance of Fortune's power is understandable.

Since Nepos wrote relatively clearly in short sentences and because of his high moral tone, his lives used to be read in beginning Latin courses and so constituted the introduction to Greek history for generations of German and British schoolchildren. Yet scholars have been critical of his many inadequacies: he confuses the two Miltiades (uncle and nephew); his chronology (as in the case of Xerxes' invasion) is sometimes garbled in his Greek lives; his haste or carelessness leads on occasion to internal contradictions; and there is a gross mistranslation from a Greek source. He does not seem to have any great critical ability in using sources and, in fact, it is far from clear whether Nepos actually used all the sources he mentions. At the beginning of the century a German scholar pronounced Nepos "neither an artist nor a scholar," while he has more recently been dismissed, in Nicholas Horsfall's much quoted phrase, as "an intellectual pygmy."

These judgments are harsh. Nepos was the first Roman to attempt Greek historical subjects, the first to write political biography, the

first to write biographies of intellectuals, and the first to write biographies of his contemporaries. He did this without even a reliable history of early Rome – Livy's first books were published about the time of Nepos' death – so he had to use the very problematic annalists. Without reference works to synchronize the various calendars – based on Roman consuls, Athenian archons, Olympiads, regnal dates of Hellenistic kings – he had to undertake that work himself in his earlier *Chronica*. While Nepos' product is far from perfect, the task he set himself in writing four hundred biographies was nothing short of monumental.

On the other hand, Nepos is no better than a mediocre stylist in Latin. He is no Cicero, nor Caesar, whom his Latin more closely resembles. Nepos can write clear and pleasant, if rather dull, Latin as long as he keeps his sentences short and syntax simple; in longer sentences the style sometimes becomes contorted and the syntax confused. At times he unleashes a rhetorical flourish that is almost embarrassing, as when he compliments Cicero's letters in these terms: "There is nothing that they do not make clear, and it may readily appear that Cicero's foresight was almost divination" (*Atticus* 16). This absurd exaggeration would be humorous if Cicero's final political misjudgments had not cost him his life.

Nepos' literary failings were probably less important to his audience. He simplified things for his readers in a number of ways: foreign offices are expressed in Roman terms, so that Hannibal is called a king (*rex*) at Carthage and the Spartan *gerousia* is called the Senate. Likewise he refers to a cult of Minerva in Greece instead of Athena, and has Hannibal sacrifice to Jupiter Optimus Maximus in Carthage in what was a cult of Baal. It was perhaps also his non-aristocratic readers that made Nepos sexually prudish. Not only does he omit the sexual adventures of Alcibiades, but Epaminondas' creation of a fighting force of homosexual lovers, successful enough to defeat Sparta, is passed over, with only a few allusions to the fact that he had no wife and children (*Ep.* 5, 10). Similarly, the implications of a homosexual relationship between Hamilcar and his son-in-law Hasdrubal are brushed aside with the suggestion that all great men are slandered (*Has.* 3).

Nepos attributes much to Fortune in his lives, and it is indeed through fortune that his work has survived. Some critics say that he writes like a schoolmaster and barely deserves to be read. But if his good anecdotes and usually agreeable Latin are not sufficient, there are several more important reasons to read him. Firstly, when he writes the history of his own time, as in the *Atticus*, he shows

himself to be a fair-minded critic and an important source. Secondly, it was Nepos' comparative lives that stood as a model behind the more important book of Plutarch over a century later. Finally, Nepos' biographies shed light on the concerns of the non-political classes during the civil war. His repeated yearning for freedom is included in many lives, and his hostility to the selfish and egotistical behavior of the political leaders of the late Republic provides a different perspective from the writings of Cicero, Caesar, and Sallust. Our understanding of the age is enriched by the survival of these biographies.

### Tacitus' *Agricola*

With the fall of Domitian, as Tacitus turned his mind toward historical writing, he published a brief, laudatory biography of his father-in-law, Cn. Julius Agricola, long-time governor of Britain and one of the most successful generals of the Flavian era. With the publication of the *Agricola* in 98 CE, Tacitus fulfilled several purposes: he paid sincere tribute to Agricola; he opened the political critique on the repression of the Flavian era; and he announced the emergence of a great historian. There are many aspects to this encomiastic work, but it is above all a biography; Tacitus in fact uses the same phrase as Nepos (1, 4: *narrare vitam*) for the writing of a life history.

Some have suggested that the *Agricola* is a written version of the traditional funeral oration (*laudatio*) that Roman aristocrats delivered to praise the achievements of the deceased, and glorify the deeds of their ancestors. In the Empire such tributes often had a political edge, and Tacitus tells us that the published eulogies of the victims of Nero and the Flavians were burned in the Forum by the public executioners. Yet the *Agricola*, while it begins and ends as a eulogy, is much more. Actual funeral orations were quite short, highly rhetorical and emotional, and less concerned with actual achievements than with the reflected glory of the ancestors. Here Tacitus gives us a public life in its political context, framed by a few rhetorical commonplaces. Though it respects the spirit of the funeral speech, it is a biography – the first great biography from Rome.

Yet this brief but ambitious book goes well beyond the usual confines of ancient biography; it contains geography and ethnography, as well as historical narrative and formal speeches. In the form of biography, Tacitus has produced an embryonic version of his

complex historical masterpieces: the political agenda, the humiliation and resentment, and the literary strategies are already apparent. Like the *Histories* and the *Annals*, it begins with a prologue linking the present with the past. In the *Agricola* we see the genesis of the historian's moral, political, and psychological ideas.

There was a long tradition among Greek and Roman historians of including ethnographic material within larger historical works. Within its biographical framework, the *Agricola* contains the basic elements of ancient ethnography: discussions of geography, local customs, and political institutions. His famous description of the climate remains apt today: "The sky is covered by clouds and frequent rain, but the cold is not severe" (12). He comments both on agriculture and the mining of precious metals, and he compares the British pearl-fishers with those of the Indian Ocean. There is much – such as a discussion of the Druid religion – that is missing, but we must be grateful for what Tacitus provides. It is unreasonable to expect that a few pages of ethnography within a biography would satisfy our curiosity about barbarian Britain.

The large central historical section of the *Agricola* (10–38) provided Tacitus with an opportunity to try his hand at narration and speeches. In Agricola's campaigns on Anglesey and in Scotland, Tacitus subordinates details of tactics to the visual and psychological sweep. Exceptionally in a biography, the author writes speeches both for the hero and for his antagonist, the rebel chieftain Calgacus. Though Calgacus is otherwise unknown, Tacitus projects Roman attitudes and rhetoric into his speech to his 30,000 troops and thus makes him an opponent worthy of Agricola. The speech echoes accusations, familiar from Sallust, of Rome's greed, cruelty, and love of power, and contains the most famous denunciation of Roman imperialism:

To robbery, to slaughter, and to theft, they give the false name of "Empire"; where they create desolation, they call it "peace."

(*Agricola* 30)

Agricola's briefer speech also recalls an earlier text: Livy's account of Scipio and Hannibal addressing their troops. Tacitus used both rhetorical and historical skills in these first speeches that he wrote for others' voices.

Though Agricola is not the most detailed character in Tacitus' writing, there is a better balance here between the public and

private man, and the general appears as more credible (and more normal) than the characters of the *Histories* and the *Annals*. Tacitus devotes scant attention to Agricola's physical appearance; it is always the inner man that interests him. Thus we read of Agricola's Stoic endurance at the murder of his mother and the early death of his only son, and his continuing devotion to his wife and daughter. With the ring of authenticity, Tacitus emphasizes his father-in-law's amiability, openness, and modesty, and registers his annoyance at skepticism that such a famous man could be truly modest. Agricola's modesty seems more like excessive shyness – his arrival at Rome by night to avoid publicity and never meeting with more than one or two friends – but the loyal Tacitus represents it as the only way to combine achievement with survival under the rule of a tyrant.

Tacitus maintains here the serious tone that one expects in Roman historical writing, though not necessarily in biography. It becomes clear that at Rome political biography required some political analysis and was thus closer to the genre of history. Casual conversations, trivial details, and coarse anecdotes are absent, and Tacitus avoids the jokes found in Plutarch, not to mention the scandal of Suetonius. The severity is relieved only by the story of the barbarian Usipi who were sold as slaves and later became famous for telling their adventures. Although there are occasional examples of the irony he would develop in his mature style, the *Agricola* already contains the elevated tone, the brevity, and the descriptive power of Tacitus' later histories.

The *Agricola* contains several political themes later developed in greater detail: the connection of censorship with the loss of political freedom; the insidious workings of imperial freedmen; and the corruption of values under an autocratic regime, so that a good reputation might be more dangerous than a bad one. The central theme is one that lies at the heart of Tacitus' political philosophy: "even under bad emperors men can be great" (42). Like Agricola, one should avoid the inflammatory setting of the Senate and fight for Rome in the provinces, since there honor is still attainable. In Rome itself, the compromise (*moderatio*) of an Agricola serves Rome better than the dramatic resistance of a self-appointed martyr. It is a political apologia, but for whom? Do we sense Tacitus' own guilt and self-justification in his desire to distinguish compromise from collaboration? Whatever its origin, the theme would recur throughout his writings.

Although Domitian's despotism left Tacitus a bitter and angry

man, he has only warmth and benevolence for Agricola. That the work is neither a political pamphlet nor a history is clear in the concluding chapters where Tacitus directly addresses Agricola. The address abounds with rhetorical commonplaces, but Tacitus invests them with a sincerity that lifts the conclusion from cliché to a powerful, personal farewell:

If there is any dwelling-place for the spirits of the just; if, as the wise believe, noble souls do not perish with the body, rest thou in peace; and call us, thy family, from weak regrets and womanish laments to the contemplation of thy virtues, for which we must not weep nor beat the breast. Let us honor thee not so much with transitory praises as with our reverence, and, if our powers permit us, with our emulation...

Whatever we loved, whatever we admired in Agricola, survives, and will survive in the hearts of men, in the succession of the ages, in the fame that waits on noble deeds. Over many indeed, of those who have gone before, as over the inglorious and ignoble, the waves of oblivion will roll; Agricola, made known to posterity by history and tradition, will live for ever.

(Agricola 46)

Tacitus could not know the irony of his words when he asserts the achievements of Agricola would live forever. From the scant texts that survive we would know almost nothing of Agricola were it not for Tacitus. His military victories and his political courage survive only in this biography, written as an act of piety.

### Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*

#### *Life and works*

The most important work of Latin biography is the twelve imperial lives written by the scholar-bureaucrat C. Suetonius Tranquillus (c. 70–130 CE). Little is known of his life. There are several internal references, five letters of the younger Pliny, an inscription from Hippo in North Africa, and several less certain references in later sources like the *Historia Augusta* and the Byzantine encyclopedia called the *Suda*. Even the dates of his birth and death can only be

inferred. Yet, because his *Lives of the Caesars* is so unlike any other ancient book, it is important to consider how his shadowy life and career might have affected his writings.

Suetonius was probably born about 70 CE in north Africa to an equestrian father who had served as a military tribune at the battle of Bedriacum. His cognomen, Tranquillus, is attributed to his father's relief at peace established after the terrible civil wars of 69 CE. From the beginning he seems to have forgone any political or military ambitions in favor of intellectual pursuits. He was studying rhetoric in Rome by 88 CE, and a decade later he asked Pliny to seek a postponement of a law case he was trying. (Suetonius says he has been frightened by a bad dream, and has lost his confidence.) His lack of self-confidence and his unrhetoical temperament must have made him a mediocre advocate, and he directed his interests to scholarship. Pliny secured a military position for Suetonius, but he preferred to pass it on to a kinsman, and Pliny obliged. Pliny called his friend *probissimus honestissimus eruditissimus* – “honest, distinguished, and a fine scholar” – when he wrote to Trajan to secure for the childless Suetonius the honorary “right of three children”; the emperor wrote back to grant the request. It must have been Pliny's influence with the emperor Trajan that secured Suetonius the position *a studiis* where he did research for the emperor and also *a bibliotheca* (imperial librarian). The honorific inscription shows that Suetonius was later *ab epistulis* (private secretary to the emperor in charge of appointments) to Hadrian and probably traveled with that restless emperor. It was also through Pliny that he became close to Septicius Clarus, praetorian prefect under Hadrian to whom Suetonius dedicated the *Lives of the Caesars*. (Pliny also dedicated the first book of his *Letters* to Septicius.) In 122 CE the emperor dismissed both his prefect and Suetonius for, according to the *Historia Augusta*, disrespectful behavior toward the empress Sabina. Whatever the truth of this story, nothing more is known of Suetonius' life, though an allusion in his biography of Titus shows that he lived to 130 CE.

Suetonius wrote a wide range of books on linguistic, antiquarian, and biographical subjects, though for most only the titles survive. He was obviously a scholar of great range, since he wrote books on such diverse topics as the Roman year, the calendar, the names of seas, and the lives of famous prostitutes. The most frequently cited was his work on Greek and Roman games, including dancing, chariot-racing, theatrical performances, and gladiatorial combat. It must have been one of those early books that Suetonius was so loath



to release in 105 CE that Pliny had to write him a politely scolding letter: "You outdo even my doubts and hesitations. So, bestir yourself, or else beware lest I drag those books out of you!" (*Ep.* 5, 10). But it was in biography that Suetonius had his greatest impact. His largest biographical collection was *Lives of Illustrious Men*, five books devoted to lives of intellectuals, with sections on poets, orators, historians, philosophers, and teachers of literature. There were perhaps one hundred lives in all. Unfortunately, the surviving section is from the book concerning teachers, divided into grammarians and rhetoricians – perhaps the least interesting portion of the work. In addition to thirty brief lives of teachers, longer surviving lives of Horace, Terence, Lucan, and (perhaps) Virgil came from Suetonius' collection. This collection required a great deal of reading and probably appeared between 110 and 120 CE. Jerome used it as the model for his lives of Christian authors.

The *Lives of the Caesars* was published in eight books. Each of the first six contained the life of a single ruler from Julius Caesar to Nero, the seventh book contained three emperors of 69, and the eighth covered the three Flavian emperors. Moral biography in the style of the Peripatetics held no attraction for Suetonius, whose imperial lives developed rather from the antiquarian lives of poets and grammarians he had already written. He thus adapts the Alexandrian tradition of scholarly biographies of intellectuals to lives of the emperors, and avoids the moral approach adopted by Nepos and by his own contemporaries Plutarch and Tacitus.

The Suetonian lives are notable in turning from a chronological to a largely thematic organization. Each life begins with a brief account of birth and family background and concludes with a record of the emperor's death, but the bulk of the biography is organized by categories like appearance, style of life, intellectual interests, entertainments provided, virtues and vices.

Having given as it were a summary of his life, I shall now take up its various phases one by one, not in chronological order, but by classes, to make the account clearer and more intelligible.

(*Life of Augustus* 9)<sup>2</sup>

This is a well-known rhetorical device, "division into parts," used for the purposes of clarity in an oration, but the actual categories may vary from one life to another. For example, the physical description of Claudius is included among his vices, while that of Nero is

given after his death. The essential element is that the topical arrangement allows greater emphasis on the individual emperor's private life and character rather than the chronological progression of his reign.

### *Biography versus history*

It is important that we judge the *Lives* on Suetonius' own terms as biography and not regard them as an inferior form of history. His purposes, methods, and results were all quite different from the literary and moral aims of an historian. The genre of history at Rome had a chronological, usually annalistic, structure, a highly elevated rhetorical and poetic style, and a focus on such public subjects as political and military affairs. Suetonius uses a non-chronological organization to make it clear that he is not writing history, his style is workmanlike, and he prefers to treat private life rather than state business. Most of all, the writing of history was a moral act, while Suetonius merely presents the data and allows, or pretends to allow, the reader to form a personal judgment. Unlike the historians of antiquity, Suetonius is not primarily a literary artist; he is the ancestor of the modern scholar.

The popular image of Suetonius as a crude scandalmonger obscures his formidable research skills which far surpassed those of his contemporaries. As we read Suetonius, we can see him at work on his card index (or its Roman equivalent), sorting anecdotes according to theme. (It is not at all clear how ancient scholars did such research and retrieved relevant information, but it is certain that memory played a far greater role than it does today.) He drew on a wide range of materials: archives, acts of the Senate, pamphlets, histories, monuments, inscriptions, and oral tradition, including his father's experiences in Otho's army. We can see his scholarly delight in handling original evidence, as when he comments that he has had proof for Augustus' original cognomen of Thurinus (with which he was taunted by Marc Antony):

That he was surnamed Thurinus I may assert on very trustworthy evidence, since I once obtained a bronze statuette, representing him as a boy and inscribed with that name in letters almost illegible from age. This I presented to the emperor Hadrian, who cherishes it among the Lares of his bed-chamber.

(*Life of Augustus* 8)

Likewise he boasts that he has seen Nero's own private notebooks:

I have had in my possession notebooks and papers with some well-known verses of his, written in his own hand and in such wise that it was perfectly evident that they were not copied or taken down from dictation, but worked out exactly as one writes when thinking and creating; so many instances were there of words erased or struck through and written above the lines.

(*Life of Nero* 52)

His greatest treasure was letters from that indefatigable correspondent, Augustus. He quotes from dozens of letters, not only in the life of Augustus but in later lives as well as his lives of Virgil and Horace. Some of Augustus' letters had been published, since both Tacitus and Pliny refer to them, but Suetonius must have found many autograph copies in the archives, since he comments on Augustus' peculiar way of squeezing material onto the end of a line as well as oddities of his spelling. Some letters deal with the most confidential family matters, like the problem of Livia's dribbling, stuttering, twitching, and limping grandson Claudius. Augustus writes to Livia (*Claudius* 4) that he is concerned that the crowd might laugh at the young prince if he sits in the imperial box at the games. In a later letter, the emperor offers, in Livia's absence, to dine each night with young Claudius to keep him from some undesirable friends. The letters shed touching light on a prominent family struggling to minimize the embarrassment of a problem child.

These letters and other source material made the lives of Julius Caesar and Augustus the richest, and longest, of the lives: about 45 and 65 modern pages. Lives of later Julio-Claudians (Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero) range between 30 and 42 pages, while Vespasian and Domitian (in whose reigns Suetonius lived) are only 15 and 18 pages each. The histories of other writers, like Livy and Tacitus, become longer and more detailed as they approach the lifetime; this pattern makes sense since there are both more abundant sources for, and greater interest in, the more recent past. Why then are Suetonius' lives of Julius and Augustus the fullest? There are several possible reasons, which are not mutually exclusive. It has often been suggested that after Suetonius was dismissed from his post he no longer had access to private letters in the imperial archives. That is a real possibility and may explain the absence of

later correspondence, but it does not explain the huge disparity in the scope of the later lives. As we have seen from his discovery of Nero's notebook, Suetonius could find original materials on later reigns. Another possibility concerns his great contemporary, Tacitus. When Suetonius began working on the *Lives*, Tacitus had published his history of the Flavian era and was known among the circle of Pliny to be working on the emperors from Tiberius onwards. Hence Suetonius would have seen little or no competition on the early period. Finally, it is possible, or even probable, that Suetonius had a particular interest in the era of Julius and Augustus. It seems to be his main archival preoccupation in the earlier lives of poets, and references back to it recur in later imperial lives. Some combination of opportunity, motivation, and personal interest (or lack of it) caused Suetonius to produce briefer and less satisfying lives as he approached his own day.

How do we reconcile Suetonius the administrator with Suetonius the scholar? To the Romans of his era no gulf would be apparent, since librarians and archivists had for centuries been scholars. When Julius Caesar decided to establish Rome's first public library, he turned to Varro, the greatest scholar of the age. Suetonius' occupation and literary training not only provided access to research material, but also shaped his biographies. He gives us interesting material on the reading habits of the emperors since, for him, this was an important window on personality. And of course he has a deep interest in the emperors' correspondence, not only the letters themselves, but how they are dealt with: Julius read them at the games, while Vespasian dealt with some letters before dressing for the day. He even includes cases of misbehavior by imperial secretaries. Augustus punished a certain Thallus (by having his legs broken) for selling confidential information, while under Claudius the freedmen had a field day forging and amending documents for a price.

One clear indication that Suetonius is at heart a scholar is his habit of quoting verbatim, both in Latin and in Greek, rather than rewriting a text in his own style. His failure to do the artistically respectable thing provides a treasure of primary material that would otherwise have been lost, especially letters and quotations. Some famous sayings come to us from Suetonius, such as Julius Caesar's statement on crossing the Rubicon to invade Italy: *jacta alea est* (*Julius* 32, "The die is cast"). During his triumph over the king of Pontus, Suetonius reports that Caesar displayed on placards only three words to describe the war: *VENI-VIDI-VICI* (*Julius* 37, "I came, I saw, I conquered"). Quotations in Greek are very rare in

Latin literary texts, though we know from Cicero's letters that the elite peppered their correspondence (and probably conversation) with Greek as the eighteenth-century Russian aristocrats did with French. It is especially interesting to see that the last words both of Julius and Augustus were in Greek. Julius Caesar turned to his assassin and former protégé Marcus Brutus with the words καὶ σὺ τέκνον ("You too, my child?"). Fifty-seven years later, after Augustus asked his friends whether he had played his part well in the comedy of life, he quoted two lines from the close of a Greek comedy:

"Since I've played my part well, all clap your hands  
And dismiss me from the stage with applause."  
(*Life of Augustus* 99)

The *Lives of the Caesars* is different in matter and manner from other Roman histories or biographies, because it is a book written by and for the equestrian, that is, for the administrative class. Suetonius and the equestrians shared the culture of the senators, but did not have the same interest in rhetoric or politics. The loss of freedom lamented by Tacitus and others was the political freedom of a few hundred members of the senatorial elite; the equestrians never had such freedom and preferred to judge the emperors on their effectiveness. They were basically sympathetic toward the principate, and preferred concrete data to ideological rhetoric when evaluating the performance of a particular emperor. It is important to know this to understand why Suetonius is much less interested in political issues than in building construction, the celebration of games, and financial policies. These matters, like the emperor's effectiveness with paperwork, are of paramount importance to the administrators of the Empire. Yet if Suetonius writes from an equestrian perspective, he does not display a parochial self-interest. Emperors who blatantly tried to promote the *equites* to the disadvantage of the Senate, as Nero did (*Nero* 37), did not merit praise. Suetonius believed that bad emperors like Caligula, Nero, and Domitian were hated by all elements of Roman society, just as the good were loved by all.

Suetonius wrote his lives of the Caesars neither to titillate, nor to mock the imperial system, though his writings have surely had such results with later readers. He wished primarily to provide in a scholarly way the material necessary for the reader to make his own judgment. Thus, for example, he devotes much space to the celebration of games. These were an important element in ensuring concord in the population of the capital and had a ritual role in the

public contacts between rulers and ruled. Augustus boasts of his games in the *Res Gestae*, and Pliny mentions them in his panegyric oration to Trajan – games were an important element in judging the effectiveness of emperors. So Suetonius provides information about the games of each emperor; sometimes emperors who are otherwise detestable (Nero and Domitian) are commended for their entertainments. So too the biographer provides physical descriptions, sexual perversions, building programs, religious devotion – all to be taken into account by the reader in forming an individual judgment. He particularly records the growing Hellenization of the imperial court: music, homosexuality, gambling, dancing, and astrology. This empirical approach, with its superficial impartiality, contrasts sharply with Tacitus' moral pronouncements based primarily on political criteria. Suetonius believes his readers would rather read a list of virtues and vices than deduce them from a narrative. The very form of his book seems designed for administrators.

He avoids the elevated style of history, and writes the clear, businesslike Latin of a scholar. In fact, he writes better Latin than other technical writers of the early Empire like Vitruvius on architecture, Celsus on medicine, and Frontinus on aqueducts. He also had greater stylistic freedom than the historians were allowed. Not only can Suetonius use obscenities, but a range of earthy or merely banal details are not out of place here as they would be in rhetorical prose. Thus his physical description of Nero:

He was about the average height, his body marked with spots and malodorous, his hair light blond, his features regular rather than attractive, his eyes blue and somewhat weak, his neck over-thick, his belly prominent, and his legs very slender.

(*Life of Nero* 51)

While Suetonius does not really have the art to embellish a scene, his narrative ability is such that it can vigorously bring inherently dramatic scenes to life: the assassination of Julius Caesar; the accession of Claudius; the death of Nero. This last scene is Suetonius' greatest literary moment, though as always with Nero, much of the theatricality and melodrama come from the emperor himself:

At last, while his companions one and all urged him to save himself as soon as possible from the indignities that threatened him, he bade them dig a grave in his presence,

proportioned to the size of his own person, collect any bits of marble that could be found, and at the same time bring water and wood for presently disposing of his body. As each of these things were done, he wept and said again and again: "What an artist the world is losing!"

While he hesitated, a letter was brought to Phaon by one of his couriers. Nero snatching it from his hand read that he had been pronounced a public enemy by the Senate, and that they were seeking to punish him in the ancient fashion; and he asked what manner of punishment that was. When he learned that the criminal was stripped, fastened by the neck in a fork and then beaten to death with rods, in mortal terror he seized two daggers which he had brought with him, and then, after trying the point of each, put them up again, pleading that the fated hour had not yet come. Now he would beg Sporus to begin to lament and wail, and now entreat someone to help him take his life by setting him the example; anon he reproached himself for his cowardice in such words as these: "To live is a scandal and shame – this does not become Nero, does not become him – one should be resolute at such times – come, rouse thyself."

(*Life of Nero* 49)

### Conclusion

Suetonius is both the pre-eminent Latin biographer as well as an important source for the first century CE, especially for the periods for which Tacitus' text has not survived. Though he was once criticized as a salacious scandalmonger, scholarly criticism of his *Lives of the Caesars* is now directed either toward his weakness as a biographer or his inadequacy as a source. The latter criticisms are, of course, unfair, since Suetonius never intended to be a "source"; he only wished to write biographies. Therefore our dissatisfaction with his omission of political material like the crisis under Tiberius, his lack of interest in chronology, his refusal to synthesize an emperor's personality as a totality, and his unwillingness to enter into the thoughts of his characters all stem from our desire for Suetonius to behave like an historian. But he is not an historian and our demand that he behave like one is unfair.

On the other hand, some criticisms of his biographies may be justified. When he repeatedly refers to sources vaguely as "some say," we can expect better from a scrupulous scholar. He is also too

quick to accept, or at least include, scandalous stories which even he does not believe. He writes of the death of Augustus' stepson Drusus:

He made no secret of his intention of restoring the old-time form of government, whenever he should have the power. It is because of this, I think, that some have made bold to write that he was an object of suspicion to Augustus; that the emperor recalled him from his province, and when he did not obey at once, took him off by poison. This I have mentioned, rather not to pass it by, than that I think it true or even probable; for as a matter of fact Augustus loved him so dearly while he lived that he always named him joint-heir along with his sons, as he once declared in the Senate...

(*Life of Claudius* 1)

Such innuendoes might be understandable in a rhetorical historian, but not in Suetonius. There is also sloppiness, as when he claims that Claudius was poisoned by mushrooms or by a drink (*Claudius* 44), but then in his life of Nero at one point blames the mushrooms (*Nero* 33) and elsewhere the drink (*Nero* 39). We might also expect a bit more psychological penetration from a biographer. Finally, the biographies of the Flavian emperors are woefully inadequate, though we have no idea for what reason Suetonius chose to make them so much skimpier than the early lives.

On the other hand, even as a source, Suetonius has much more to recommend him. His objectivity and indiscriminate approach to his material has preserved an enormous amount that any Roman historian would have jettisoned. One might compare him to an indiscriminate collector who gathers the books, pamphlets, newspapers and other ephemera of the time; a century later scholars are grateful that the collector did not discriminate since he has thus saved material that actual libraries would have thrown away. Moreover, the fact that Suetonius did not edit his material makes it more valuable than the elaborate speeches found in historians' texts.

On some occasions, Suetonius is quite impressive in his treatment of material. In his life of Julius Caesar, he provides critical reactions to Caesar's commentaries from Cicero, Hirtius, and Asinius Pollio (*Julius* 56). Then, rather than recounting the conquest of Gaul, he assumes his reader knows it and provides his own extended analysis (*Julius* 57–70) of the generalship of Caesar,

including discussions of personality, tactics, strategy, and relations with his troops. If Caesar's own book had not survived, we would surely complain that Suetonius had not summarized it, but in the circumstances his treatment is more thoughtful and probing than we might expect of a biographer.

There are also several cases where the biographer seems determined to correct mistakes in Tacitus, though the historian is never named. In the life of Tiberius, Suetonius refers to "some" who have written that Augustus did not think well of Tiberius and only named him as his successor to please his wife, or so that he himself would seem better to posterity. This is a direct allusion to Tacitus' report of popular gossip at the funeral of Augustus (*Ann.* 1, 10). The biographer is explicitly critical:

But after all I cannot be led to believe that an emperor of the utmost prudence and foresight acted without consideration, especially in a matter of so great moment. It is my opinion that after weighing the faults and the merits of Tiberius, he decided that the latter preponderated.  
(*Life of Tiberius* 21)

He then quotes passages from a half-dozen of Augustus' letters to prove his point. Another instance is Tacitus' brief comment (*Ann.* 14, 16) that Nero relied on others to provide him with poetic lines. Suetonius actually consulted Nero's manuscript notebook to ascertain that the poems were in his own handwriting, with crossings-out as if they were being worked out. A third case shows Suetonius rising to a level of critical analysis and substantiated argument rarely found in ancient historical writing. The biographer says he is responding to Pliny's assertion, based on an inscription, that Caligula was born in his father's military camp in Gaul, but the thoroughness of his discussion makes it likely that he was actually refuting Tacitus' passing comment on the same point. Suetonius first discounts the inscription — it could as well apply to the birth of Caligula's sister — and then produces a letter from Augustus as well as the *Acts of the Senate* that place the birth at Antium on the Italian coast. In these three instances Suetonius successfully uses research and documentation to rebut his more distinguished, but always unnamed, contemporary. It must have given him considerable satisfaction.

The *Lives of the Caesars* made such an impression that biography replaced narrative history as the preferred form of political narrative for over 250 years. Suetonius himself became the model for later

biographers, both pagan and Christian. He was also important in the Carolingian era as the model for Einhard's very Suetonian *Life of Charlemagne*. It was inevitable that his portrayal of the outrageous behavior of the Roman emperors would find many readers in Renaissance Italy. Petrarch and Boccaccio were among the earliest to read him in manuscript and use him in their own writings. Only in the eighteenth century did the moral biographies of Plutarch replace Suetonius as the model for biography.

Suetonius created a unique literary form. Not only were his lives a marriage of Alexandrian intellectual biography and Roman features, but his was the first series of linked lives from the ancient world, anticipating the *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch. This scholar was not an historian, but he remains one of the two most important sources for the early Empire. His lives are particularly useful for Augustus, and for the reigns of Caligula and Claudius where Tacitus' text is totally or partially lost. His prodigious learning provides much that cannot be found elsewhere, especially information about literary, cultural, and scientific developments. The scattered data are the more valuable since they are presented with cool detachment rather than as part of an argument. If he is a lesser intellectual figure than his Greek contemporary Plutarch, he is in many ways a more valuable historical source.

### *Historia Augusta*

One of the strangest literary texts from the ancient world is the series of biographies preserved in a ninth-century codex (from which all later copies derive), and for centuries it has infuriated scholars and delighted ordinary readers. The manuscript is entitled "Lives of Various Emperors and Pretenders from the Deified Hadrian to Numerianus Written by Different Authors" (*vitae diversorum principum et tyrannorum a divo Hadriano usque ad Numerianum diversis compositae*). In the seventeenth century, the editor Isaac Casaubon gave it the name *Historia Augusta*, since in a passing reference the text (*Life of Tacitus* 10, 3) refers to the emperor Tacitus as a descendant of the "author of the imperial history" (*scriptorem historiae Augustae*). That name has stuck down to the present day.

There are thirty biographies in all, though some contain lives of more than one ruler: four with two lives, two with three, one with four, and one collective biography called "The Thirty Tyrants" gives very brief accounts of various pretenders to imperial power in the third century CE. The entire collection covers the period from Hadrian

to Numerianus, 117–284 CE, though there is a lacuna for the period between 244 and 259 CE. The lives, which include emperors, their heirs, and unsuccessful pretenders to the throne, are attributed to six different authors: Aelius Spartianus, Julius Capitolinus, Aelius Lampridius, Vulcacius Gallicanus, Trebellius Pollio, and Flavius Vopiscus. The authors evidently lived in the time of Diocletian (284–306 CE) and Constantine (306–37 CE), since many lives are dedicated to these emperors and the first four authors occasionally address them directly. Though Pollio and Vopiscus do not dedicate their biographies to the emperors, references within their writings indicate that they were contemporaries of the others.

As early scholars attempted to describe the characteristics of the individual authors, they began to find the attributions troubling. Even Edward Gibbon, who made much use of these biographies in the early chapters of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, smelled a rat and came close to despair in the *Advertisement to the Notes*:

But there is so much perplexity in the titles of the mss., and so many disputes have arisen among the critics concerning their number, their names, and their respective property, that for the most part I have quoted them without distinction, under the general and well-known title of *Augustan History*.

(Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* I ix)

The biographies follow the model of Suetonius, beginning with the birth and early life, and closing with the death and posthumous honors or reputation. In the large central section of the biography, the material is divided into categories. Like Suetonius', these lives are filled with the gossip of tabloid journalism mixed with a large number of "documents" (letters, official decrees, senatorial acclamations, etc.), quotations from the emperors, and references to other ancient writers. Major lives may run to well over twenty modern pages, though some pretenders treated in "The Thirty Tyrants" may warrant as little as a paragraph.

#### *The problems with the Historia Augusta*

During the last two centuries scholars have identified a wide range of problems in this strange book. One is a seeming homogeneity of style in all the lives, a point that has recently been confirmed by computer analysis. This stylistic uniformity is accompanied by

similarities of attitude and treatment: a pro-senatorial bias and polemics against hereditary monarchy and the imperial court, as well as similar kinds of digressions and puns on the names of emperors. Even more serious, scholars gradually proved that most of the 130 documents included range from the suspicious to the outrageously false. The earlier lives, which contain more reliable material that can be cross-checked against other sources, do not contain such documents, but they proliferate in the more suspicious lives. Likewise, many of the names and sources mentioned throughout are fabrications. There are also anachronisms, such as the mention of Pertinax as emperor in a speech by Marcus Aurelius, who died thirteen years before Pertinax became emperor (*Avidius Cass.* 8, 5). The most serious chronological problem is the material that comes from Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, whose books were published in 360 and 369 CE respectively, a half-century after the dates when the biographies were ostensibly written.

Another problem is that several of the authors claim that they have written lives of *all* the emperors:

It is my purpose, Diocletian Augustus, greatest of a long line of rulers, to present to the knowledge of your Divine Majesty, not only those who have held as ruling emperors the high post which you maintain – I have done this as far as the Deified Hadrian – but also those who have borne the name of Caesar, though never hailed emperors or Augusti.

(Aelius Spartianus in *Aelius* 1)<sup>3</sup>

For I have undertaken, Diocletian Augustus, to set down in writing the lives of all who have held the imperial title whether rightfully or without right, in order that you may become acquainted with all the emperors that have ever worn the purple.

(Vulcacius Gallicanus in *Avidius Cass.* 3, 3)

If several series of lives were written, who chose which ones to include in this collection? Is it possible that an editor rewrote the lives, thus producing the stylistic and methodological similarities?

#### *What is the Historia Augusta?*

In 1889 the distinguished Roman historian Hermann Dessau suggested that the entire *Historia Augusta* was written by a single

author in 395 CE—from sixty years to one hundred years after it claimed to be. The next century produced a torrent of scholarly criticism, arguments, and hypotheses, culminating in the pronouncements of the greatest Roman historian of the recent past, Sir Ronald Syme (1903–89). Syme concluded that the authorship, date, dedication, and all the documents were fraudulent, though he agreed with Dessau that the work was written by a single author about 395 CE. Where does this mountain of scholarly controversy leave us?

The reason this dispute is so crucial is that the *Historia Augusta* is the most important source—or at least would be, if we can believe it—for the second and third centuries CE, the apogee of the Roman Empire and the beginning of its collapse. Even if the authors and the date are false, anything we may be able to deduce about them is valuable. There is much reliable history in the early lives, so an understanding of date, authorship, and purpose of the work might help us determine what else is reliable. Even the act of fabrication might tell us something about the time in which it was composed or compiled. Hence the historical stakes are high in trying to understand the origins and motivations of this extraordinary book.

The lives contain outrageous scandal mixed with a pretense of scholarship. In addition to casual cross-references to other bogus material in the collection, the authors refer repeatedly to otherwise unknown “sources.” A certain Aelius Junius Cordus is referred to two dozen times, and is even criticized:

For we do not think we need recount absurd and silly tales such as Junius Cordus has written concerning his domestic pleasures and petty matters of that sort. If any desire to know these things, let him read Cordus; Cordus tells what slaves each and every emperor had and what friends, how many mantles and how many cloaks.

(*Gordiani* 21, 3–4)

Since Junius almost certainly never existed, these repeated references look like a prank or a private joke. So too does Flavius Vopiscus’ beginning of his *Aurelian* (1–2), where he rides up to the Palatine with the prefect of the city in 303 CE, Junius Tiberianus, who offers to get special permission to see linen rolls with the emperor Aurelian’s diary. The mention in the passage of the “fellow-biographer” Trebellius Pollio almost certainly clinches the fact that the entire scene is a fabrication. So too the following passage where the author’s creative imagination conjures up ivory books:

And now, lest any one consider that I have rashly put faith in some Greek or Latin writer, there is in the Ulpian Library, in the sixth case, an ivory book in which is written out this decree of the Senate, signed by [the emperor] Tacitus in his own hand. For those decrees which pertained to the emperors were long inscribed in books of ivory.

(*Tacitus* 8, 1–2)

If the biographies are similar in style, there are certainly differences. The lives of important second-century emperors seem reasonably reliable and have virtually no suspicious documentation. But the later life of Severus Alexander (222–35 CE) reads like an historical novel whose protagonist greatly resembles an idealized picture of Julian, called the Apostate (360–3 CE). The lives of the later third century seem to deteriorate as the author becomes more inventive in creating documents and bolder in his falsification of history.

In recent decades the *Historia Augusta*, which was once seen merely as a mediocre collection of badly written biographies, has taken on a new interest; it has been called a hoax, a forgery, a history *à clef* for an inner circle, and even a spoof of imperial biography. No one any longer takes it at face value, and nearly all scholars believe it was written or rewritten by a single author. The most important issues now are when and why this fraud was constructed. Hypotheses have placed it at various dates between 337 and 500 CE, but in recent years scholars have come to agree that it was written about the last decade of the fourth century—somewhere around the date suggested by Dessau and Syme. The reasons are numerous, but one is the dependence of the *Historia Augusta* on Book 15 of Ammianus Marcellinus, first published in 392 CE.

The more difficult question is why. “*Cui bono?*” asked Theodor Mommsen: “Who profited from it?” There are actually two questions: why write a fraudulent book and why disguise its authorship? The second question is a bit easier. By projecting his work back to the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine, the author gave it increased credibility and greater authority. Whether he has a political or religious agenda, or just wanted to write a popular book, an earlier date increased his chance of success. Another possible reason for anonymity is to ensure his personal security. The pro-pagan, pro-senatorial bias was common enough among the aristocratic elite of the late fourth century, but the *Historia Augusta* also contains repeated criticisms of the imperial court and even sympathy for Republican views. For example, the Empire is shown as prospering

in the six months in 275 CE between the death of Aurelian and the selection of Tacitus as his successor (*Tacitus* 1–2). Since the interregnum was actually about two months, the author lengthens it and thus emphasizes the advantages of senatorial control. He might prefer to attribute such views to a fictitious writer.

Why write such a book? The biases of the author have long been recognized, but it seems unlikely that the *Historia Augusta* was primarily written as a work of propaganda. It is simply too frivolous, and too scandalous, to be taken seriously in support of political or religious ideas. A passage at the end of the biography of the pretenders leaves little doubt that the author comes close to flaunting his hoax:

Now bestow on anyone you wish this little book, written not with elegance but with fidelity to truth. Nor, in fact, do I seem to myself to have made any promise of literary style, but only of facts, for these little works which I have composed on the lives of the emperors I do not write down but only dictate, and I dictate them, indeed, with that speed, which, whether I promise aught of my own accord or you request it, you urge with such insistence that I have not even the opportunity of drawing breath.

(*Thirty Tyrants* 33, 8)

We must imagine the author, surrounded by scattered papyrus copies of earlier sources, dictating to his slave. It would seem he decided to produce a series of lives, taking up where his great model Suetonius left off. He should have begun with the short-lived Nerva and the competent (but dull) general Trajan. He preferred to begin with the more colorful Hadrian – hence the first lie – and when he begins there are reasonably good sources available. Thus he need only mix in an occasional salacious story. But as he proceeds and the better sources fall away, he roguishly invents what he needs, more and more outrageously, as he moves from biography to fiction. There is little question that the author was humorous and irreverent, and that he immensely enjoyed the process of creating the hoax. Whether he was a lawyer, an historian, or a grammarian – all have been suggested – he added his own private jokes: elaborate references to his six fictional alter-egos, strange etymologies, and genuine quotations transferred from one emperor to another. More than one scholar has been reduced to fury by this behavior. But our author is no more a lunatic than those tabloid editors who boost

circulation with Elvis re-sightings. He simply became so caught up with his own creation that his talent as a biographer was far exceeded by his genius as inventor of fiction.

### *The Historia Augusta as an historical source*

Since historians cannot afford to cast aside any substantial source, it is necessary to analyze the lives carefully to see what may come from reliable earlier sources. Scholars have sometimes been overcritical: Veturius Macrinus, praetorian prefect in 193 CE, was dismissed as an invention until an inscription confirmed his existence. Even in this fabricated *Augustan History*, most of the life of Hadrian can be confirmed by other historical sources, like Cassius Dio, or by archaeological remains such as the brickwork of the Pantheon, Hadrian's Wall in Britain, and his villa in Tivoli. But we must always be aware that what is not otherwise confirmed may be a historical fact, an invention, or a joke. Those three possibilities must continuously be kept in mind.

Some of the author's sources are known, though few have survived. For the second century we have a set of biographies as far as Caracalla by an unnamed author – scholars imaginatively call him Ignotus – who seems to have been reasonably reliable, and another set of more gossipy ones by Marius Maximus (whom the *Historia Augusta* mentions almost thirty times). In imitation of Suetonius, Marius, who was consul in 197 and 223 CE, wrote twelve lives from Nerva to Heliogabalus. He was almost certainly the model our impish author was attempting to imitate or even supplant. Our author also used the Syrian Greek Herodian for 180–238 CE, the Athenian Dexippus down to 270 CE, and a lost imperial history (known as *Kaisergeschichte*) for the period after 260 CE, as well as surviving writers like Aurelius Victor and Eutropius.

Perhaps we should conclude the brief examination of this difficult text with the author's final words. Even at a distance of sixteen centuries we can tell that his tongue is firmly in his cheek:

And now, my friend, accept this gift of mine, which, as I have often said, I have brought out to the light of day, not because of its elegance of style but because of its learned research, chiefly with this purpose in view, that if any gifted stylist should wish to reveal the deeds of the emperors, he might not lack the material, having, as he will, my little books



as ministers to his eloquence. I pray you, then, to be content and to contend that in this work I had the wish to write better than I had the power.

(*Carus* 21, 2–3)

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AT ROME

### Greek antecedents

It has been said that autobiography was unknown to the ancient Greeks. This statement is true only if we restrict autobiography to that genre of personal self-revelation best known in St Augustine's *Confessions* and in writings of later writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. That genre, in which the author traces his or her educational and emotional development, was indeed unknown in Greece. Writing about oneself indeed flourished in Greek poetry – from Hesiod's story of his dispossession, Sappho's emotional attachments to her female students, and the early poet-philosophers' revealing aspects of their lives. But writing about oneself is not autobiography, which requires a historical dimension of writing about one's past life. Yet there is in fact a form of autobiography we find in Greece that is also popular today: the memoirs of a public figure. Figures like Henry Kissinger or Colin Powell may not tell us about their adolescent temptations and spiritual development, but they provide an "inside perspective" – usually in terms of an *apologia* for their actions – on important political or military affairs. Similar memoirs survive from the fourth century BCE, and there may have been even earlier ones.

The most famous Greek military memoir is the *Anabasis* ("The March Up-Country") by the Athenian Xenophon, who had enlisted as a mercenary under the Persian prince Cyrus in his attempt to wrest the throne from his brother. The book tells of the march of 10,000 Greek recruits to Mesopotamia, where disaster befell them in 400 BCE. With Cyrus dead on the battlefield and most of the Greek senior officers murdered by treachery, newly appointed generals (including the thirty-year-old Xenophon) had to lead the remnants of the army through what is today Iraq, the