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THE COMPOSITION OF SUCTONIUS' CAESARES AGAIN

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Suetonius' imperial biographies probably appeared in chronological order despite a recent view to the contrary which suggested that *Galba-Domitian* preceded *Augustus-Nero*.

In a recent article G. W. Bowersock¹ has proposed that Suetonius' biographies of the emperors Galba to Domitian were written under Trajan before those of Caesar to Nero. This new view, in opposition to the generally assumed idea that the *Lives* were written in chronological order, was reached after an examination of certain items of vocabulary and of constructional technique in Suetonius. Bowersock concluded that the set *Iulius to Nero* is more or less the outcome of earlier stylistic experiments in the set *Galba to Domitian*, a theory which, although attractive in many respects, provokes further questions.

A start may be made by examining the opening of the *Vespasian* which does not, as the opening of a Suetonian life usually does, focus immediate attention on the antecedents of the princeps, but provides a more general introduction to the Flavian dynasty as a whole:

'Rebellionē trium principum et caede incertum diu et quasi uagum imperium suscepit firmavitque tandem gens Flavia ...'

Yet this is not simply an introduction. The references to the *tres principes* and the precarious condition of the state are elliptical unless the reader knows of the historical events which preceded the rise of the Flavian house. This passage might therefore be better described as a bridge-passage between the end of the *Vitellius* and the beginning of the *Vespasian* proper at *Vesp.* 1.2. It must be accepted in consequence that the biographies *Galba to Domitian* were written in chronological order, a point which seems perfectly acceptable in terms of the new theory.²

This point is worth stressing, however, for there is only one other place in the *Caesares* where an introduction of any kind appears, and that is at the beginning of the *Galba*. This life

1. 'Suetonius and Trajan' in *Hommages à Marcel Renard, Collection Latomus* 101 (1969), I, pp. 119ff. Hereafter abbreviated as 'Bowersock'.

2. Cf. Bowersock, p. 121.



opens with a straightforward assertion: 'Progenies Caesarum in Nerone deficit'. Then for sixteen lines of Teubner text details of *signa* which foretold the demise of the Julio-Claudian line are provided by Suetonius. As in the case above, this first section of the *Galba* does not really make good sense unless it is assumed to be a logical continuation of the historical events which preceded in time, events that is, which have already been covered in a previous biography. *Galba* 1 does make an effective transition from *Nero* 57, a description of public and private reactions to Nero's death, to the year of the four emperors; but it does not make a successful introduction to the events of A.D. 68/69 alone. For emphasis a contrast may be drawn with Tac. *Hist.* 1-11, where Tacitus fully explains his reasons for beginning a piece of historical writing with the reign of Galba and gives sufficient background information to make this feasible. But there is nothing so comprehensive in Suet. *Galba* 1; the *Nero*, at least, has to have been read beforehand. In Bowersock's argument, however, the *Galba* would be the first biography in order of composition. Yet the foregoing comments suggest that this cannot have been so. They might further suggest that the statement 'The Julio-Claudian Lives... form a group distinct from those that follow the *Nero*'³ requires some slight modification.

The new concept of the order of composition of the *Caesares* automatically invites comparison with the procedure of Tacitus in the *Histories* and *Annals*. But, as already intimated, this does not provide the perfect analogue; the introduction to the *Annals* is as clear and well-defined as that to the *Histories*. What is important here, however, is the very idea of an introduction or preface to a set-piece of prose writing. Some sort of programmatic statement was of course a convention in the historiographical tradition,⁴ and it has been thought, with reason, that the now missing sections of the *Iulius* contained Suetonius' preface along with the dedication to C. Septicius Clarus.⁵ Biographers as well as historians adhered to this rule:

3. Bowersock, p. 120.

4. See the remarks for instance of R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy I-V*, (Oxford 1965), pp. 23ff. And now D. C. Early, 'Prologue-form in ancient historiography,' *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* I 2, (ed. H. Temporini, 1972), pp. 842ff.

5. Dedication to Septicius Clarus, Iohannes Lydus, *De Mag.* 2.6; remarks on the missing preface, cf. G. B. Townend, 'The Date of Composition of Suetonius' *Caesares*', *CQ* n.s.9 (1959) pp. 285ff.

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Cornelius Nepos opens the *De Excellentibus Ducibus Exterarum Gentium* with a virtual apologia for biography, while as late as Einhard, closely following a Suetonian model in the *vita Karoli*, a lengthy introduction to a Latin biography is still present. It cannot really be thought that Suetonius departed from the norm. Yet there is nothing of this at the beginning of the *Galba*, neither general introduction nor dedication nor even address of a patron or friend. Even if the *Galba* were written under Trajan, Pliny and Septicius Clarus still could have served as possible dedicants for the work. It seems, therefore, that a second consideration can be urged against adoption of the new theory.

Attention may now be directed towards some of Bowersock's own arguments. Firstly vocabulary. It is noted that the distribution of certain words in the two sets of lives may help to strengthen the distinction between them. Thus *crudelis/crudelitas*, overtaken in the second set by *saeuus/saeuitia*.⁶ This is fair enough, but the argument could be urged equally in favour of the notion that the set *Galba* to *Domitian* was written after *Iulius* to *Nero*. The usual Suetonian word for 'cruel/cruelty' is *saeuus/saeuitia*, the *Iulius* and *Otho* being the only biographies where *saeuus* or a cognate does not appear. It might thus be contended that *crudelis/crudelitas* were used for the sake of *uariatio* in the first set of lives and that this concern disappeared subsequently.⁷ Such an argument would also account for the use of *lentus* as 'cruel' at *Tiberius* 57.1, the *Tiberius* being the biography most in need of synonyms for *saeuus*.

Next *pudicitia*, again absent from the second set.⁸ It can be held that with a theme such as cruelty virtually every imperial biography gave Suetonius opportunity to illustrate it. The same might be said, for example, of *libido*. But naturally even though some topics may and do recur from life to life it cannot be expected that all topics will recur all the time. The content of a biography is bound to vary according to the material available to the author. In this way the lack of examples of *pudicitia* could be partially explained. But even if the distribution of the word is taken as a sign of difference in quality between the two

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6. Bowersock, p. 120.

7. For the view that standards of accuracy and care gradually declined in Suetonius (assuming chronological order of composition), see G. B. Townend, 'Suetonius and His Influence', in T. A. Dorey (ed.), *Latin Biography* (London 1967), pp. 79ff.

8. Bowersock, p. 120.

sets of lives this is not an argument *per se* that either set was definitely written before the other. The same is true of the uses of *incursio* and *incursus*, respectively divided between the two sets, and *abstinentia*.⁹

Out of five appearances of the latter only one occurs in the first set, and that in the *Iulius*. Now it cannot be axiomatic that an author favours the use of a particular word at only one point of his literary career; the word might be employed, discarded, and later resurrected. Such a view of the distribution of *abstinentia* seems just as plausible as the new view that the appearance in *Iul.* 54.1 is an indication that the *Iulius* was written after the *Domitian* where the word occurs three times.¹⁰ It is not in dispute that there are differences between the two sets of biographies; only that the argumentative force of these differences can be urged either way on the issue of the order of composition of the *Caesares* themselves.¹¹

9. Bowersock, pp.120ff. Bowersock believes (p. 122) that the distribution of *abstinentia* can be used to show that the second set of lives was written under Trajan. The last phrase of *Dom.* 23.3, 'abstinentia et moderatione principum' is taken as a reference to Nerva and Trajan and to what in private conversation Bowersock has called the 'ideology' of Trajan's principate. That then is the time of composition, and comparison is invited with Tac. *Agric.* 3; *Hist.* 1.1; and Pliny, *Panegyric*. The last phrase of the *Dom.* certainly should refer to Nerva and Trajan, but this is not in itself evidence of composition in the Trajanic era for the abstract nouns are not good evidence in themselves. The *Panegyric* contains, obviously, a whole series of virtues which are attributed to Trajan, the most predominant, apart from *moderatio*, being *liberalitas*, and *modestia*. Now these three words are also used by Suetonius, eighteen times in all, and they are found in nine of the twelve biographies. Should it then be claimed that all of Suetonius' *Lives* are directly influenced by Trajanic slogans? Probably not. It might be better to believe that Suetonius simply used these words as required. Observe also that the use of *abstinentia* at *Iul.* 54.1 is not to Caesar's credit. Yet if the *Iulius* were written as a result of Trajanic enthusiasm for Caesar (Bowersock, p.123), such criticism could hardly be appropriate. Finally, a possibly indiscreet remark for Trajan's ears might be detected at *Dom.* 8.2, where the high quality of Domitian's urban and provincial appointments is commended by Suetonius, and then contrasted with unsavoury developments subsequent to Domitian's death. Whether the generalization is true does not matter; nor whether it was directed solely against Nerva. Either way the statement would have been offensive if noticed by Trajan. The last piece of the *Dom.* is therefore probably less specific an allusion than Bowersock proposed.

10. Bowersock, p. 122.

11. Bowersock later (p. 123) attempts to differentiate between Suetonius' use of *adulescens* at *Nero* 57.2 and *adulescentulus* at *Dom.* 12.2. This cannot really be done. Both terms are used frequently by Suetonius but no precise definition attaches to either; in *Aug.* 20, Augustus is *adulescens adhuc* at thirty, in *Aug.* 62.1 *adulescens* at twenty. Another distinction is drawn between Suetonius' two divergent accounts of the culpability of Cn. Piso in the death of Germanicus, *Calig.* 2.1 being more reticent in tone than *Vitell.* 2.3, hence a sign of Suetonius' familiarity with Tac. *Ann.* II and composition subsequent to the passage from the *Vitell.* Again, this

On to structure in Suetonius. Bowersock observes¹² that for traditionally tyrannical rulers a 'bipartite' structure was found suitable by Suetonius, a division basically between the good and evil in each subject. Yet the *Domitian*, although the biography of a tyrant, does not use this duality because at the time of its composition such a structural pattern had not yet been developed by the author. Any reading of this biography, however, will surely impress the reader with a distinction between the good and evil in Domitian's reign. From *Dom.* 3. 2 to *Dom.* 9.3 the positive aspects of the Domitianic government are spelled out in no uncertain terms. At *Dom.* 10.1 a break is indicated, developing the generalization made at *Dom.* 3.2, and until *Dom.* 16.2 examples of evil are paraded unequivocally. It may be true that the division at *Dom.* 10.1 is not as marked as those in other lives where Suetonius speaks in the first person;¹³ but it is a division none the less. So, it can be affirmed that in actuality the *Domitian* does have a certain bipartite structure and that, moreover, this fact can be used to support either compositional view: Suetonius had evolved the bipartite idea before he wrote the first set of lives (on Bowersock's order of composition); Suetonius drifted away from the practice of using explicit *diuisiones*, along with other shortcomings, in the second set of lives (on the traditional view, as stated by Townend).¹⁴ But there is no *proof* for either view.

The new theory next speaks of a 'recognizable and recurring pattern'¹⁵ in the Julio-Claudian lives, by which is meant, presumably, the repetition in the biographies of similar rubrics since the bipartite division is claimed only for the *Tiberius*, *Caligula* and *Nero*. But it is not only the Julio-Claudian lives which contain similar rubrics; all the lives do so in one way or another. What is important, surely, is that in the matter of structure the *Caesares* are not as stereotyped as the number of rubrics which provide the contents of the biographies themselves. The structure of each life has to be approached individually.

argument could be completely turned around and the less circumspect passage be regarded as an example of increased slackness in the second set of lives (following Townend's view). Alternatively, it could be pointed out that Suetonius on occasion is aware of varying source traditions on given topics, but does nothing to reconcile them; cf. Townend *op. cit.* p. 91. The present discrepancy is not dissimilar.

12. P. 121.

13. Cf. *Tib.* 42.1; *Calig.* 22.1; *Nero* 19.3.

14. Above, n. 7.

15. Bowersock, p. 121.

These are signs that the differences between the two sets of lives are not as strong as is sometimes believed, and that the differences in the lives of the second set may have been overstated. Thus, it may be preferable, on the grounds stated, to revert to the time being to the belief that Suetonius' *Caesares* were in chronological order.¹⁸

¹⁸ Dr. G. Luck and Dr. Bowersock himself kindly read the first draft of this article; I am grateful to them.

The clearest indications of structural arrangement are given by *divisiones*, more prominent in the first set but by no means apparent in every single life. Hence, in the *Claudius*, even though the familiar rubrics are there, one has to speak of a less cohesive structure than in most other lives of the first group. It can be held, therefore, with Townend,¹⁶ that the need for obvious pointers disappeared as the overall pattern of a Suetonian biography became increasingly clear. And since in the first group there are biographies as flexibly arranged as in the second set, again it emerges that nothing is really provable from the argument of structure.

It needs to be reemphasized that the content of a Suetonian life was influenced partly by the amount of information available to the author, partly by the length of time spent by the subject in public life, partly by the length of the subject's life. These basic facts are perhaps sometimes neglected. In stressing the qualitative difference between the two sets of lives Bowersock claims that the second set is 'far less ambitious, far less detailed, far more chaotic'.¹⁷ However, it is worth observation that Galba, Otho, and Vitellius led relatively uneventful lives before their respective accessions to supreme power, unlike, for instance Augustus or Nero. Their early careers were not suitable for extensive record because they lacked undue celebrity, notoriety, or participation in dynastic intrigue. Given the fact that Galba, Otho and Vitellius reigned only for very short periods of time, accomplishing very little in the process, it is hardly surprising that their biographies are not as detailed as, say, the *Iulius*. But if the *Galba*, *Otho* and *Vitellius* are put together (as indeed indicated by the book division) the result would be a total length not dissimilar from the *Claudius* — and for a much shorter length of time.

Moreover, it can be pointed out that signs of critical awareness are not lacking on Suetonius' part in the second set of biographies. In *Vitellius* 1.1 — 2.1 the problem of the origins of the Vitellii is scrupulously presented even though Suetonius cannot reach a definite resolution. In *Vespasian* 1.4 he refers to his own investigation into Vespasian's family; in *Vesp.* 16.3 he distinguishes carefully, and to the emperor's advantage, the arguments for and against Vespasian's greed. And in *Domitian* 11.3 insistence is made that in a directive to the senate Domitian is being quoted exactly.

16. *Op. cit.* p. 86.

17. P. 120.

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