

IMPERIAL VIRTUES IN SUETONIUS' *CAESARES*

K. R. BRADLEY

The Johns Hopkins University

An argument has been made that Suetonius' use of virtue-terms reflects criticism of the emperor Hadrian; this article argues the reverse; it suggests instead that the use of virtue-terms should be attributed to the development in the ideology of the principate of imperial virtues, on which Suetonius could draw as one means of assessing his biographical subjects.

A noticeable feature of Suetonius' *Caesares* is the frequent use and illustration of virtue-terms to demonstrate aspects of character. This is not altogether surprising given that virtue-terms were deeply connected with the traditionally moralistic nature of Roman historiography and that, in an increasingly political sense, even under the Republic associations had begun to develop between powerful individuals and certain isolated virtues: Sulla and *felicitas*, Caesar and *clementia* provide two well known instances of this. It is worthwhile, however, to examine some of these usages in Suetonius, not least because the possibility of contemporary allusiveness is thereby introduced; any historical work is naturally subject to the influence of developments or tastes prevalent at the time of writing, and when Hadrianic allusions have been detected in Tacitus' *Annales* (1) the same might be anticipated for the *Caesares*. An approach of this kind must of necessity be subjective especially since the literary tradition for Hadrian is not above reproach. (2) Nonetheless, the minimal appearance in the *Caesares* of words which served as predominant Hadrianic coin legends (*annona, felicitas, liberalitas, providentia, clementia, concordia, iustitia, pietas, salus Augusti, securitas,*) and their association in the main with *mali principes* has formed part of an argument that Suetonius and Hadrian felt a mutual, deep antipathy;

(1) R. Syme, *Tacitus* (1958), 498; 517ff.

(2) Of the major literary sources for Hadrian's life and reign Dio's account survives only in excerpted form, while the Augustan life, even though one of the so-called 'good lives', is by no means fully reliable. It cannot be axiomatic that our tradition of Hadrian necessarily reflects the full contemporary view.

Hadrianic propaganda as seen from the coinage provided Suetonius with a means of indirect criticism of the emperor. (3) Given the fact of Suetonius' dismissal from the government service under Hadrian (*HA Hadr.* 11.3) that notion is not in itself unpleasing. In what follows, however, attention will be paid to showing that Hadrianic propaganda in this narrow sense had little or no effect on Suetonius and that the extensive use of virtue-terms must be fitted into a wider perspective.

A statistical survey of word usages in Suetonius can be misleading because it fails to give sufficient attention to matters of literary technique. Even though the sum total of appearances of a given word (e.g. *clementia*) may be few, this is of little consequence if illustrations of the concept are catalogued; there is then no need for pure verbal repetition. (4) It should be emphasised too that coin legends may be used to characterise a reign or to refer to a specific event during a reign; this means that comparison between terms on coins and in an author is valid only if the usages are consistent (which is difficult to determine), while in literary works a further distinction is required between cases where terms are used with direct reference to a reign (whether general or specific) and cases where terms are used neutrally, simply to communicate. At the commencement of a reign most virtues advertised on the coinage would be symbolic of the aspirations of the new dispensation, (5) though with such a legend as *liberalitas* a commemorative purpose might also quickly appear. Commemorative issues, however, might refer to such a variety of situations, dependent upon the political climate of the day, that if indeed Suetonius, especially in the early years of Hadrian, were influenced by propaganda slogans, that influence should be expected in all probability to derive from the characterising aspect of the coinage. Thus, usages in the *Caesares* of virtues related to specific episodes must essentially be judged in terms

(3) T. F. Carney, 'How Suetonius' Lives Reflect on Hadrian' *Proc. Afric. Class. Assoc.* 11 (1968), 7ff, from which the list of legends is taken. G.W. Bowersock, 'Suetonius and Trajan' in *Hommages à Marcel Renard, Collection Latomus* 101 I (1969), 119ff (cf. K. R. Bradley, *Jl-ES* 1 (1973), 217ff) prefers Trajanic allusions. Cf. A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (1971), 99f on the avoidance of panegyric by imperial biographers.

(4) E.g. *Jul.* 75.1; *Aug.* 51.1, and often elsewhere.

(5) Cf. H. Mattingly, *BMC Imp.* III cxxiv, clxiv on Hadrian.

of historical accuracy. To believe that Suetonius wrote some or all of the biographies with the conscious aim in mind of making allusions to Hadrian would seem to undermine the accuracy of his historical accounts. Yet if the terms are needed for purposes of historical biography then the virtues cannot be claimed of necessity as retrojections of contemporary prevailing motifs. What is required, therefore, is not so much a count of the terms themselves as an examination of the contexts in Suetonius to see precisely how slogans are used.

First a certain amount of pruning is appropriate due to the irrelevance to the problem of a large number of Suetonian passages, either because the reference antedates the reign of the biographical subject or else because the reference is to some person other than the emperor. (6) For instance, the use of *annona* at *Galba* 7.2 can have no implicit connection with Hadrian since Suetonius is, here discussing Galba's governorship of Africa. Likewise the use of *felicitas* at *Iul.* 35.2, where the term is not applied to Caesar at all but to Pompey. On this basis a whole string of passages can simply be eliminated from consideration, (7) which is important because it means that some emperors altogether lose association with various virtue-terms. (8)

There are other types of irrelevance. A latinised quotation from Euripides at *Iul.* 30.5 leaves no more than a tenuous association between Caesar and *pietas*. The use of *annona* at *Aug.* 42.3 is subordinate to a more important idea, the illustration of Augustus as *salubris princeps*; so also with *Aug.* 41.2, the illustration of Augustus' *liberalitas*; *Aug.* 25.2, the use of servile troops at a time of shortage; and *Nero* 45.1, the arrival of a ship from Egypt with a disappointing cargo at a similar time of scarcity. Association between *annona* and Augustus does still

(6) Both of these conditions seem necessary if any association between Hadrian and a predecessor is to be achieved. It cannot be conceded that the mere appearance of a virtue-term in any context whatever will apply, except in so loose a way as to be meaningless, either to the biographical subject or to Hadrian.

(7) *Tib.* 8 (*annona*), *Aug.* 27.2 (*clementia*), *Tib.* 20 (*concordia*), *Aug.* 3.2, *Galba* 7.1 (*iustitia*), *Claud.* 6.2 (*liberalitas*), *Aug.* 66.2, *Calig.* 1.1, 12.1, *Vitell.* 3.1, *Domit.* 11.3 (*pietas*), *Titus* 6.2 (*securitas*), *Nero* 7.2, *Vitell.* 17.1 (*salus*).

(8) In actuality Suetonius does not link, as claimed by Carney (*art. cit.*), *annona* with Galba, *concordia* with Tiberius, *felicitas* with Caesar, *iustitia* with Augustus or Galba, *liberalitas* with Claudius, *pietas* with Augustus, Vitellius or Domitian, or *salus* with Nero.

exist (*Aug.* 18.2), but not in the case of Nero; nor, further, in the case of Tiberius, since at *Tib.* 34.1 *annona* is used not with reference to grain in particular but to the high cost of food in general. Neutral usages of *salus* occur at *Aug.* 14.1, *Calig.* 14.2, 15.4, 27.2, *Claud.* 37.2, *Vit.* 15.2. The use of *securitas* at *Iul.* 23.2 is purely personal with no application to the Caesarian regime at large. The majority of the uses of *felicitas* in Suetonius do not describe the general felicity of any reign but relate instead to the personal good fortune of the emperor. Thus, at *Aug.* 94.1 omens are recorded which predicted Augustus' *felicitas* and at *Vesp.* 5.5 it is stated that during Nero's hellenic tour Vespasian dreamed *initium sibi suisque felicitatis futurum*. Comparable passages here are *Nero* 40.3 and *Vesp.* 5.2. Certain usages of *liberalitas* are neutral or too personalised to contain any political significance, *Iul.* 38.2, *Calig.* 46, *Claud.* 29.1, *Galba* 15.1, while with *clementia* Suetonius at times verges on the ironic, as at *Tib.* 53.2, *Vit.* 14.2, *Domit.* 11.2, so that such pieces should be dismissed for the reason that literary effect supersedes any political connotation.

Once these results of contextual examination are all taken into account the number of strictly relevant passages in Suetonius is diminished and the possibilities of deliberate allusiveness substantially curtailed. It remains to see what can be made of the texts which survive the tests of irrelevance.

Given the perennial problem of famine in antiquity all emperors needed to be attentive to ensuring the Roman grain supply. The actions of Augustus and Claudius to safeguard the *annona* are well known from sources other than Suetonius, (9) so there is basically little reason to believe other than that Suetonius concerns himself with historical reality at *Aug.* 18.2 and *Claud.* 18.1. Moreover, it can be noted that Suetonius' attitude to Augustus is generally favourable while he tends to be non-committal about Claudius. If, then, provisions for the *annona* appear in favourable contexts in biographies not of *mali principes* there cannot be any adverse reflection upon Hadrian. Presumably Suetonius would have equally approved

(9) *Tac. Ann.* 1.7; *Dio* 54.1; 55.26. 1-3; 31.4; 60.11. 1-5, *RG* 5.2; 15.1 (see the commentaries of Brunt and Moore).

Hadrian's *annona* claims.

Clementia is a term more emotive than the majority of imperial virtues. But again the point needs emphasis that Suetonius approves of *clementia* at *Iul.* 51.1, *Aug.* 51.1, *Nero* 10.1, and *Domit.* 10.1; that he provides *exempla*; and that his accounts are consistent with other sources. (10) It is true that in the cases of the *Nero* and *Domitian clementia* may be exemplified in one portion of the biography in order to make its later absence the more condemnatory for the biographical subject, but here Suetonius' immediate concern lies with the subject himself, nothing more. In addition, it has been shown that the very term *clementia* had undergone significant changes of meaning by Hadrian's time; (11) it is questionable therefore to what degree the Suetonian examples of imperial clemency are at all relevant to Hadrianic *clementia*.

Two passages in Suetonius show how political concord of one sort or another might be elicited. Claudius at his last appearance before the senate urges *concordia* between his sons (*Claud.* 46); to the reader of Suetonius' day that could be construed as ominous in view of the events of A.D. 55. Yet it is difficult to spot allusion here or at *Otho* 8.1, where at the news of Vitellius' acclamation on the Rhine Otho urges the senate to placate Vitellius, to achieve *quietam concordiamque*. (12).

Detailed inspection shows that the only occasion on which *felicitas* is used in Suetonius to connote general prosperity for the *res Romana* is at *Aug.* 58.2, where Valerius Messala prays for *perpetuam felicitatem reipublicae*. The lack of direct association with Augustus himself is obvious.

(10) See the evidence variously collected in L. Wickert, *RE* 22² s.v. 'princeps' cols. 2234ff; 2241f; 2243; S. Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (1971), 237ff. For Domitian cf. K. H. Waters, *Phoenix* 18 (1964), 49ff esp. 71ff; for Nero cf. *AJP* 94 (1973), 172ff.

(11) M. P. Charlesworth, 'The Virtues of a Roman Emperor' *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 23 (1937), 113ff; cf. Ch. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome* (1950), 150ff; Weinstock, *op. cit.*, 233ff.

(12) *Concordia* does not appear on coins of Otho himself (here the prevailing legend is *securitas*, *BMC Imp.* I 366) but it does for Galba and Vitellius, *BMC Imp.* I 317, 368, 375 etc. On *concordia* in general see M. Amit, 'Concordia. Idéal politique et instrument de propagande' *Jura* 13 (1962), 133ff; J. Béranger, 'Remarques sur la concordia dans la propagande monétaire impériale et la nature du principat' *Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte und deren Nachleben, Festschrift für F. Altheim* I (1969), 477ff; Weinstock, *op. cit.*, 260ff.

The occurrences of *liberalitas* promise to be more significant because this term as a coin legend makes its first appearance under Hadrian; perhaps then a greater chance of implication and allusion. Suetonius to be sure does record and documents items of imperial generosity (*Aug.* 41.1, *Nero* 10.1, *Domit.* 9.1) and he is critical of Tiberius for niggardliness (*Tib.* 46, 48.3). Three *mali principes* on the traditional view. The benefactions of Augustus, Nero and Domitian, however, are once more historically exact items, (13) and the passages from the *Nero* and the *Domitian* occur in those sections of the biographies which comprise the *acta* of which Suetonius approves. In light of the criticism of Tiberius it is fair to maintain that Suetonius looked with approval on any emperor's recognised obligation to provide the Roman populace with periodic gifts, and this must apply to Hadrian too since his provision of largesse is beyond dispute. (14)

Of the Suetonian uses of *pietas* which seem to be valid in a political context four, if not five, can be grouped in a single category, the demonstration of filial piety to the preceding ruler at the beginning of a new reign (*Tib.* 70.3, *Calig.* 15.1, *Claud.* 11.2, *Nero* 9, ?*Calig.* 12.3). Independent testimony can again be summoned. (15) Further, this procedure became eventually so standardised a part of any accession that it is difficult to ascertain how hidden meaning could be found in these instances. Admittedly the accession of Hadrian had its sticky side, but in the first century of the Empire very few arrivals to power had been utterly smooth; there was after all nothing unfamiliar about Hadrian's show of *pietas* to Trajan.

No examples of *securitas* or *iustitia* germane to the problem can be found in Suetonius, and *providentia* never appears at all. This latter fact has been regarded almost as a deliberate omission: in discussion of providential aspects of administration Suetonius must have found it difficult to sidestep the word. (16) Perhaps that is true, though one wonders to how many contemporary readers the omission would be noticeable. More-

(13) E.g. *RG* 15ff (with Brunt and Moore); *Tac. Ann.* 13.31; 34; *Dio* 67.4.4.

(14) H. Mattingly, *BMC Imp.* III cxxxi; cxlv; *HA Hadr.* 7.3.

(15) E.g. *Dio* 56.34.4; 46.3; 59.2.1; 3.7-8; 60.35.2.

(16) Camey, *art. cit.*, 19. Observe, however, that Tacitus uses *providentia* only on three occasions (*Syme, op. cit.*, 738); deliberate also?

over, *providentia* seems to have a wide scope of meaning in comparison with other virtues. (17) and it may be argued that while the term as such is not employed, its component parts – *liberalitas*, *annona*, *salus* etc. – are. There was thus perhaps no need for the word.

In sum one is compelled to conclude that where the imperial virtues itemised above are employed by Suetonius it is on a basis of historical fact and approval with very little likelihood of contemporary overtones or criticism.

The next step must be to look at the history of the Hadrianic coin legends themselves. As remarked above only *liberalitas* is new under Hadrian. All the others stretch back into the first century. *Annona* first appears under Nero and continues into the Flavian period, (18) while an alternative form of the same advertisement, *Ceres Augusta*, is found under Claudius and the emperors of 68/69. (19) *Felicitas* makes its first entry under Galba and also continues under the Flavians, including Domitian. (20) If Suetonius were really minded to draw attention to the *annona* or *felicitas* motifs of Hadrian the obvious question of why he paid no attention to these emperors in this respect presents itself. *Clementia* appears under Vitellius, (21) and *pietas* has a not uncommon first century provenance. (22) From Tiberius on *salus* is employed in a variety of ways, for instance the elaborate and specific *salus generis humani* of the civil war period. (23) So too *concordia* is variously used. (24) These terms, then, should not be considered anything but part of a stock of increasingly traditional and familiar imperial virtues, commonly accepted and understood by Suetonius' contemporaries when the *Caesares* were published.

The argument that has been presented inclines strongly against the theory of allusiveness in Suetonius' biographies.

(17) See the discussion of M. P. Charlesworth, 'Providentia and Aeternitas' *HTR* 29 (1936), 106ff; cf. C. H. V. Sutherland, *Coinage in Roman Imperial Policy* (1951), 59f; J. Béranger, 'La Prévoyance' (*Providentia*) impériale' *Hermes* 88 (1960), 475ff.

(18) *BMC Imp.* I, II index s.v. 'annona'.

(19) *Ibid.* I, index s.v. 'Ceres Augusta'.

(20) *Ibid.* I, II index s.v. 'felicitas'.

(21) *Ibid.* I, index s.v. 'clementia'.

(22) *Ibid.* I, II index s.v. 'pietas'.

(23) *Ibid.* I, II index s.v. 'salus'.

(24) *Ibid.* I, II index s.v. 'concordia'.

Nevertheless, it can be shown that other writers of the period were influenced by current propaganda slogans, (25) and there is still value as far as Suetonius is concerned in the basic idea of a comparison between common coin legends and their counterparts in the imperial lives. What stands out, in spite of the pruning operation above, is not just the use of words which served as Hadrianic motifs, but of a whole spectrum of words, including others such as *moderatio* or *modestia*, (26) which are drawn upon to portray the character of an emperor or the quality of his reign. Concepts such as *virtus*, *fama*, *gloria*, and *dignitas* had always been important parts of the Roman historiographical tradition. (27) But Suetonius as a rule is not so much interested in these amorphous ideas as the more delimited terms discussed above. His selection of these terms is to some extent random, depending on the nature of the subject's life and period of rule. There may be also favourite ideas which recur in several biographies. And of course his employment of these words is not unique; they occur throughout Latin literature, particularly in the political vocabulary of the Late Republic and again in a contemporary setting equally in Tacitus and, most blatantly of all, in the *Panegyric* of Pliny. But the choice is deliberate. Also of importance in this respect is the legacy of encomium in the biographical tradition inherited by Suetonius. The virtue-terms are used by Cornelius Nepos though here the treatment is rather different, for Nepos can be unashamedly encomiastic in a way that Suetonius never matches. Further, Nepos' work is moralising in nature and the purpose behind his writings is clearly to provide instruction and edification in the best traditions of Roman historiography. (28) In contrast, Suetonius does not adopt overtly any such moralistic or didactic standpoint; indeed, personal statements of any kind

(25) For echoes of Nerva-Trajanic propaganda see Tac. *Agric.* 3.1; *Hist.* 1.1; Plin. *Epp.* 9.13.4; *Pan.* 58.3; 67.3 etc.

(26) *Modestia*, Titus 4.1; *Domit.* 2.2; *moderatio*, *Iul.* 75.1; *Aug.* 21.3; *Tib.* 32.2; cf. also *indulgentia*, *Iul.* 65; 72.

(27) D. C. Earl, *The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome* (1967), passim. These words do of course appear in Suetonius but they do not as a rule form illustrated ideas; for exceptions see *Tib.* 17.1; *Iul.* 55.1; *Aug.* 21.3.

(28) See E. Jenkinson, 'Nepos - An Introduction to Latin Biography' in *Latin Biography* (1967), ed. T.A. Dorey, 1ff.

at all are rare in the *Caesares*. (29) Thus, while the origins of Suetonian biography can be traced back through Nepos to Greek sources along a variety of paths, and while Suetonius retains moralistic jargon in his work, the terms themselves now have a non-moralistic application, but instead a special political flavour dependent upon the emperor and his deeds. One might maintain, therefore, that the relevance of virtues to Suetonius is to be found more in the political ethos of the principate in his own day than in literary tradition. In fact, it might be suggested that the development of a supply of imperial virtues and attributes through the first century with which the Roman public was increasingly familiar, (30) allowed Suetonius a ready made vehicle for assessing emperors and their periods of rule. To concentrate on coin legends alone, however, is too constricted an approach. The celebration of imperial attributes on inscriptions and monuments was just as effective a means of propaganda as the coinage. The visible quality, or otherwise, of the virtues expected from the emperor was readily apparent. Of equal importance to Suetonius besides attributes were their opposites, imperial *vitia*, naturally not commemorated on the coinage or in any other official manner, yet whose presence in the *Caesares* cannot be missed. What Suetonius is concerned with, then, is the identification of one figure with any number of stock attributes and the recognition of this at large in Roman society, as well as the potential for abuse of virtues; and this is reflected in his literary method through the use of virtue/vice generalisations and consequent *exempla*.

(29) G. B. Townend, 'Suetonius and His Influence' in *Latin Biography* (above n.28), 90.

(30) Syme, *op. cit.*, 756.