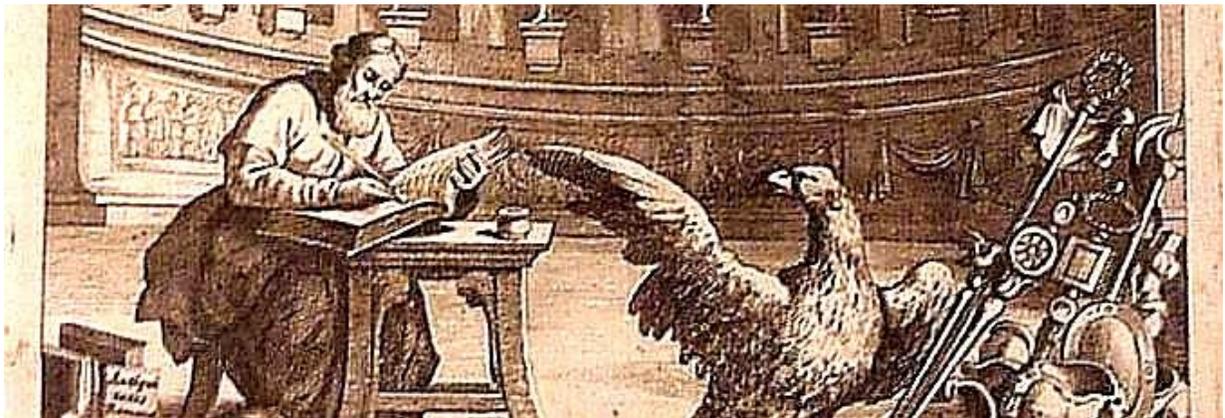


Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus

Suetonius, in full **Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus** (born AD 69, probably Rome [Italy]—died after 122), Roman biographer and antiquarian whose writings include *De viris illustribus* (“Concerning Illustrious Men”), a collection of short biographies of celebrated Roman literary figures, and *De vita Caesarum* (*Lives of the Caesars*). The latter book, seasoned with bits of gossip and scandal relating to the lives of the first 11 emperors, secured him lasting fame.



Suetonius’ family was of the knightly class, or equites. A friend and protégé of the government official and letter writer Pliny the Younger, whom he accompanied on Pliny’s posting as governor of Bithynia. He seems to have studied and then abandoned the law as a career. After Pliny’s death Suetonius found another patron, Septicius Clarus, to whom he later dedicated *De vita Caesarum*. Upon the accession of Emperor Hadrian (117), he entered the imperial service, holding, probably simultaneously, the posts of controller of the Roman libraries, keeper of the archives, and adviser to the emperor on cultural matters. Probably around 121 he was promoted to secretary of the imperial correspondence, but in 122 or somewhat later he was dismissed for the neglect of court formality, after which he presumably devoted himself to literary pursuits.



Most of Suetonius’ writings were antiquarian, dealing with such subjects as Greek pastimes, the history of Roman spectacles and shows, oaths and imprecations and their origins, terminology of clothing, well-known courtesans, physical defects, and the growth of the civil service. An encyclopaedia called *Prata* (“Meadows”), a work like the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder, was attributed to him and often quoted in late antiquity.

Suetonius' *De viris illustribus* is divided into short books on Roman poets, orators, historians, grammarians and rhetoricians, and perhaps philosophers. **Very nearly all that is known about the lives of Rome's eminent authors stems ultimately from this work**, which survives only in the whole of one section and in the preface and five lives from another section. The lives of Horace, Lucan, Terence, and Virgil, for example, are known from writers who derived their facts from Suetonius.

De vita Caesarum, (aka The Twelve Caesars) which treats Julius Caesar and the emperors up to Domitian, is largely responsible for that vivid picture of Roman society and its leaders, morally and politically decadent, that dominated historical thought until modified in modern times by the discovery of nonliterary evidence. The biographies are organized not chronologically but by topics: the emperor's family background, career before accession, public actions, private life, appearance, personality, and death. Though free with scandalous gossip, they are largely silent on the growth, administration, and defense of the empire. Suetonius is free from the bias of the senatorial class that distorts much Roman historical writing. His sketches of the habits and appearance of the emperors are invaluable, but, like Plutarch, he used "characteristic anecdote" without exhaustive inquiry into its authenticity.

