

The Immortality of the Mind vs. the Body within the Imperial Biographies of Suetonius

By the time Suetonius had completed his *De Vita Caesarum* in 121 CE, the emperor Hadrian had established firm control over his empire as the third member of the Nervan-Antonian Dynasty. For over a century prior, the *populi Romani* had lived and died under Roman imperial rule. As renewed hopes for prosperity and good fortune accompanied each imperial regime change, Romans sought to discern the characteristics and tendencies of a new emperor in relation to those of his predecessors, both in order to determine an emperor's legitimacy to rule, and to acquire advanced knowledge of how the empire would fare under his reign. Nevertheless, for the vast majority of the population which lived under Roman rule, the emperor himself remained a mysterious and inaccessible figure. Although statues of emperors were erected in *fora* throughout the Roman Empire as a form of imperial propaganda, they only served to remind everyday Romans of the impact that the emperor had upon their daily lives, and not to judge the emperor based upon his merits or lack thereof. Where statues succeeded in immortalizing the physical attributes of the Roman emperor, however, they often failed to immortalize his magisterial capabilities. Ancient writers such as Isocrates and Tacitus, within their *Evagoras* and *Agricola* respectively, stressed that the judgment of a particular ruler be in accordance with that emperor's deeds and accomplishments, not his physical attributes. The imperial biographies authored by Suetonius, however, seem to follow a different path. Throughout his *De Vita Caesarum*, Suetonius develops a tried and true approach toward analyzing a particular emperor within the context of his reign. Striving to immortalize certain characteristics of several Roman emperors through *per species* categorization, Suetonius makes the conscious decision to focus upon minute details of an emperor's facial expressions and physical body, as well as the role that divination played both in interpreting an emperor's body and his ability to rule. Suetonius seems

to place particular importance upon an emperor's ability to maintain a stern expression and a countenance devoid of emotion. This paper will explore the implications that this aspect of imperial presentation had upon both the individual reigns of Roman emperors and upon Suetonius' readers themselves. Moreover, this paper will explore Suetonius' focus on the imperial body within the greater context of ancient biographical tradition, specifically as described within Isocrates' *Evagoras* and Tacitus' *Annales*, *Histories*, and *Agricola*. While earlier authors such as Isocrates and Tacitus seem to emphasize the immortalization of a man through the description of their mental abilities and personal character, Suetonius' shift toward the physical body of the emperor and the interpretation of an emperor's body and regime through divination indicates that Suetonius' imperial biographies may have been intended to fulfill a deeper purpose. This purpose included, but was not limited to, allowing Suetonius' readers to "read" the emperor themselves, thereby suggesting that an emperor was either fit or unfit to rule, or perhaps making subtle suggestions to Hadrian himself, from whose court Suetonius completed his *De Vita Caesarum* in 121 CE.