

Fired or Retired? Reevaluating the End of Suetonius' Career

The past few decades have found scholars especially concerned with the dating of Suetonius' *De Vita Caesarum* and his *De Viris Illustribus*. Recently, scholars have made attempts to situate the publication dates of these two works within the context of Suetonius' career as *ab epistulis* to the emperor Hadrian. These attempts at dating Suetonius' works relied heavily upon the account from the *Historia Augusta* of the termination of Suetonius' career as *ab epistulis* (*HA, Hadrian, 11.3*):

Septicio Claro praefecto praetorii et Suetonio Tranquillo epistularum magistro multisque aliis, quod apud Sabinam uxorem iniussu eius familiaris se tunc egerant, quam reverentia domus aulicae postulabat, successores dedit, uxorem etiam ut morosam et asperam dimissurus, ut ipse dicebat, si privatus fuisset.

Due to the context of this passage, scholars have assumed universally that Suetonius' term as *ab epistulis* ended in humiliation when Hadrian dismissed Suetonius for excessive familiarity with the empress Sabina (Lindsay, 1994; Wardle, 2002; Power, 2010). This stance further assumes that Suetonius fell out of favor with Hadrian and that the end of Suetonius' term was in no way a willing resignation or retirement. However, because the dates of Suetonius' political career and his standing with the emperor Hadrian greatly influence modern attempts at dating his *De Vita Caesarum* and his *De Viris Illustribus*, this accepted interpretation of *Hadrian, 11.3* is open to valid criticism

In order to investigate whether the end of Suetonius' term as *ab epistulis* in 122 A.D. was undoubtedly a dismissal, this paper conducts an analysis of the specific phraseology that the author of the *Historia Augusta* employs at *Hadrian, 11.3* to discuss the removal of Suetonius from Hadrian's court. More precisely, this paper contends that this phraseology, a variation of

the phrase *successorem dare*, does not necessarily imply the removal or dismissal of an official from office. On the contrary, the phrase *successorem dare* is simply a neutral phrase that could just as easily imply that an incumbent official received a replacement because he had been seeking retirement, because he had voluntarily abdicated his position, or perhaps because he had passed away; any of these scenarios required the filling of a political vacancy. Moreover, this paper analyzes additional appearances of this phraseology within the works of Suetonius and Pliny the Younger, as well as its appearance throughout the other *Lives* of the *Historia Augusta*, in order to argue that the precise meaning of the phrase itself is largely dependent upon the narrative within which it appears, and that the presence of the phrase does not automatically imply that the appointment of a political successor followed the dismissal of the incumbent. Rather, the *Historia Augusta* often employs stronger verbs, such as *dimitto*, to indicate clearly and beyond a reasonable doubt that a dismissal from office took place. Finally, this paper explores how this alternate interpretation of *HA*, *Hadrian*, 11.3 affects what is known about the publication dates of Suetonius' *De Vita Caesarum* and his *De Viris Illustribus*, about Suetonius' relationship with Hadrian, and about the career of Suetonius himself.

Bibliography

- Lindsay, Hugh. (1994). "Suetonius as Ab Epistulis to Hadrian and the Early History of the Imperial Correspondence," *Historia*, Bd. 43, H. 4: 454-68.
- Power, Tristan J. (2010). "Pliny, Letters 5.10 and the Literary Career of Suetonius," *JRS*, 100: 140-62.
- Wardle, D. (2002). "Suetonius as 'Ab Epistulis': an African Connection," *Historia*, Bd. 51, H. 4: 462-80.

