

Evolution of an Empire

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Suetonius provides insight into the development of the Roman empire through the lens of the emperors that he talks about. Suetonius as a writer tends to focus on theatrical adaptations of historical events, though his work is still grounded in actions that people did take. The *Lives* are not something to be taken as historical fact but merely a summation of the life of an emperor. Suetonius's earlier *Lives* don't seem to have a character development aspect to them, though if that is because of his writing style or the emperor himself is uncertain. There isn't any way to know if Suetonius's work is fully fictitious and grounded on gossip alone, and there is an impossibility of seeing what the emperor's were really like considering Suetonius' way of presenting them. Focusing on the Julio-Claudius dynasty, Suetonius shows that the empire underwent an evolution that forever changed the trajectory of the empire as a whole. This shift in the empire as a whole rooted itself in the emperor at the time, showcasing different individuals and their response to the needs of the empire.

The first of these lives, *The Deified Augustus*, portrays the emperor Augustus in a rather glowing way. Augustus, from a historical point of view, was the one to change the empire the most, transforming it from a republic to an empire with his establishment of the principate - centralizing power for himself while maintaining the facade of a republic entity. In essence, Augustus became the first emperor but presented himself as a restorer of the republic, something that after Augustus isn't seen with any of the other emperors. In Augustus's younger days on the triumvirate, Suetonius writes that while the others "were swayed in many cases by personal considerations and entreaties in favour of particular individuals, he [Augustus] alone argued strongly that one on should be spared."¹ Showcasing Augustus's strong nature to depersonalizing the government at this point is the biggest step that he could have taken in order to completely reform the republic.

¹ Suetonius, "The Deified Augustus," in *Lives of Caesar*, 2009, p. 56.

Another thing that particularly defines Augustus as an emperor is the amount of projects that he started and the overall reordering of power and government. In comparison to others that came after him, like Tiberius, Suetonius makes it a point to talk about what the emperor's actually did when they were in charge and had power. Augustus has been remembered as the one who incorporated many buildings and projects to Rome including the Temple of Mars the Avenger where he said that the senate would meet to "conduct its debates as to whether wars should be waged to triumphs awarded"² as well as dividing the city into regions and districts.³

One key component to what made Augustus a great emperor was his passivity in taking roles. Suetonius writes that Augustus "turned it [consulship] down on the many occasions it was offered"⁴ and only after the death of Marcus Lepidus did he accept the office of Pontifex Maximus.⁵ Using this there is almost a facade to how Augustus truly came into power, seeing as there was no active involvement in taking the roles but also a humane side to him in showing that he can keep his bloodthirst on the battlefield. Showcasing him in this way makes Augustus appear as the perfect all-rounder emperor that the empire needs in order to function like it should, though it is evident in later chapters that there were some who could not handle the weight of the job. In terms of Augustus though, the position of emperor seemed like a placeholder of sorts, a mock 'head-of-the-state' because while he did congregate power to himself, he still allowed others to have a say in the matter and simply observed and only used his authority when he felt he needed to.

In contrast to Augustus, emperors such as Caligula appeared to be a complete change in regards to the office of emperor. Suetonius notes that from a young age Caligula enjoyed the

² Ibid. p. 58.

³ Ibid, p. 59.

⁴ Ibid, p. 56

⁵ Ibid, p. 59.

torment of others,⁶ though this could be explained because his upbringing mainly occurred in military camps. Suetonius also writes that Caligula would regularly go out “disguised...to indulge in gluttony and adultery.”⁷ Showcasing these aspects of Caligula at an early age almost seems to foreshadow how his reign will be and the outcomes that might occur.

Even with his personality being this way, Caligula had a way with the people and seemed to guarantee his spot as emperor with this with Suetonius writing that “he was the answer to the prayer of the Roman people, or should I say, all humankind,”⁸ which just shows how popular among the people Caligula was. When Caligula accepted the role of emperor there was “such public rejoicing”⁹ that sacrificed victims had seen a huge increase. Caligula not only had popularity because of his family name, but also because of the ways in which he tried to garner it from the people. He bestowed honors among several members of his family, a theme that most emperors followed with in support of the Roman idea of family and what it meant. Regardless of Caligula’s popularity with the people, Suetonius still applies a negative light to his character as a whole writing that “[t]hough nature had made his face hideous and repulsive”¹⁰ and that his “body was ill formed”¹¹ implying some form of grotesque being that was the leader of this empire.

Not only does Suetonius focus on Calidula’s appearance, but he also points out his personality and how he was as a person and leader. Suetonius continuously points out Caligula’s hedonism, writing that he “invented...the most outlandish varieties of food and drink”¹²; though

⁶ Suetonius, “Caligula,” in *Lives of Caesar*, 2009, p. 140.

⁷ Ibid, p. 140.

⁸ Ibid, p. 141.

⁹ Ibid, p. 142.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 162.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 162.

¹² Ibid, p. 155.

not only with his lavish lifestyle but also in his habit of sexual deviance and incestual activities that Suetonius points out (“habitually indulged in incestuous relations with all his sisters”¹³).

In simply this comparison of Augustus and Caligula, especially in such a short time between their reigns, that the office of emperor changed from a functional role to a status-hood with no merit. Beginning with the role of Augustus and actually instating laws and keeping a more passive role showcased that Augustus was doing a job, in essence, though in comparison with Caligula - or even Tiberius, Nero, and Caludius - there is evidence that the ones who came latter simply saw the emperor role as something they did because of family ties. The later emperors, regardless of if they were better or worse than each other, obtained the role via family ties and did not seem to fully comprehend the total role of emperor and instead focused on dispensing their own sense of justice, an inflated sense of self, and less public works for the people.

The role of the emperor has seen shifts in only a manner of decades to what most people will remember it as. Augustus starts out the position as one where authority can be used when needed, valuing the traditional aspects of Roman society, and listening to the people and keeping them in mind when creating laws or public infrastructure. The death of Emperor Augustus signaled the death of the empire as it should have been; the rise of Tiberius cemented this. And even though there were others who came after and tried to do what Augustus did (Claudius and Vespasian) the damage was already done and could not be reversed. The role of emperor was already bonded to this notion of grandiosity and lavishness, and changing that would be extremely hard for just one person. Because of this trust in the emperor was dwindling as more and more people realized that the office was one of lavish and luxury.

¹³ Ibid, p. 148.

References

Suetonius. 2009. *Lives of the Caesars* (Oxford World's Classics). Reissue. Oxford University Press.