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The Twelve Caesars (Annotated)



Synopsis

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De vita Caesarum (Latin, literal translation: On the Life of the Caesars) commonly known as The Twelve Caesars, is a set of twelve biographies of Julius Caesar and the first 11 emperors of the Roman Empire written by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. The work, written in AD 121 during the reign of the emperor Hadrian, was the most popular work of Suetonius, at that time Hadrian's personal secretary, and is the largest among his surviving writings. It was dedicated to a friend, the Praetorian prefect Gaius Septicius Clarus. The Twelve Caesars is considered very significant in antiquity and remains a primary source on Roman history. The book discusses the significant and critical period of the Principate from the end of the Republic to the reign of Domitian; comparisons are often made with Tacitus whose surviving works document a similar period. Julius Caesar Augustus Tiberius Caligula Claudius Nero Galba Otho Vitellius Vespasian Titus Domitian

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Customer Reviews

Not much is known about the life of Gaius Suetonius Tranquillis. He was probably born in A.D. 69--the famous 'year of four Emperors'--when his father, a Roman knight, served as a colonel in a regular legion and took part in the Battle of Baetricum. Suetonius became a scribe and noted

secretary to the military set, eventually ending up in the service of Hadrian, who was emperor from A.D. 117-138. He was dismissed for 'indiscreet behaviour' with Hadrian's empress, Sabina, but not before doing sufficient research to complete many books of a historical nature. His attempts at philosophy were much less well received, and most of his history has been overlooked by all but classical scholars, but this work, 'The Twelve Caesars' has held the imagination of more than just the scholarly set since it was first written. Suetonius had the good fortune of speaking to eyewitnesses from the time of the early Caesars. Much of his information about Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero in fact comes from those who observed and/or participated in their lives. Suetonius is in many ways more of a reporter than an historian--he would record conflicting statements without worrying about the reconciliation (this set him apart from Tacitus and other classical historians who tried to find a consistency in stories and facts. Suetonius has been described as the tabloid journalist of ancient Rome, because not only did he not appear to check facts (which in fact is not true--he did check, he just didn't try to smooth over the conflicting facts), but he choose to concentrate on the private lives, motivations and personality quirks of his subjects rather than their grand plans, policies and military/political victories. Thus, many details of the lurid scene appear.

This is a collection of essays about the first twelve Roman rulers to bear the name Caesar. It is the definitive collection of eyewitness stories about the early emperors as they were seen by their contemporaries. The rulers covered by this book include Julius Caesar; his adopted son Octavian who ruled as Augustus, and his descendents; the warlords who contended for power in the "Year of Four Caesars" after Nero was overthrown, and the Flavians who came out on top in that struggle. In other words, the full list of twelve is: Julius Caesar Augustus Tiberius Gaius Caligula Claudius Nero Galba Otho Vitellius Vespasian Titus Domitian. If you want to understand the early Roman Empire, you need to read this book. If you are a budding novelist and want to write about the early Empire, you need to read this book. Reading Suetonius is not perhaps a sufficient condition to allow you to understand or write convincingly about the period, but it is a necessary condition. Robert Graves, author of "I Claudius" and "Claudius the God" translated this version: not surprisingly many of the snippets of gossip and fascinating little stories from Suetonius find their way into his novels. They also find their way into every good novel about first century Rome that I have ever read, absolutely without exception. You should not take for granted that every word of Suetonius's account is accurate. Reading carefully, you will see that where he heard two conflicting accounts of an issue or event he quotes both, usually without attempt to reconcile them.

Mine is a much earlier edition of THE TWELVE CAESARS, but it's still Robert Graves translation of Suetonius' text, so it is what it is. Suetonius was apparently quite a prolific writer, with a wide variety of titles, from LIVES OF FAMOUS WHORES to METHODS OF RECKONING TIME to his credit. Outside of a few isolated fragments, however, THE TWELVE CAESARS is his only surviving work. It begins with Julius Caesar, who was Dictator but never Emperor in the true sense, continues through Nero, who was assassinated around the time of Suetonius' birth and was the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and ends with Domitian, last Emperor of the Flavian dynasty. You also get lots of helpful items included, such as family trees of the imperial families and relevant maps. Altogether, this is a very nice book. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was a Roman of the equestrian class, born around the year 69. Little is known of his life, but his friend, Pliny the Younger, tells us that he practised law briefly, avoided politics and eventually became chief secretary to the Emperor Hadrian. His prominent position in the palace would have been extremely helpful to his writings, providing him with ready access to imperial and senatorial archives and to people who had first-hand knowledge of the events Suetonius was writing about. He uses this material well by writing more than just a dry accounting of public events. Along with the major occurrences, we are also treated to the private lives of his subjects: personal anecdotes, scandalous details, and amusing incidents that only palace intimates would have known. Suetonius presents this material in an even-handed style, avoiding any obvious personal bias and freely admitting when he tells of something that he is unable to verify.

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