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SUETONIUS *GALBA* 1: BEGINNING OR ENDING?

progenies Caesarum in Nerone defecit: quod futurum compluribus quidem signis, sed vel evidentissimis duobus apparuit. Liviae olim post Augusti statim nuptias Veientanum suum revisenti praetervolans aquila gallinam albam ramulum lauri rostro tenentem, ita ut rapuerat, demisit in gremium; cumque nutrir alitem, pangi ramulum placuisset, tanta pullorum suboles provenit, ut hodieque ea villa “ad Gallinas” vocetur, tale vero lauretum, ut triumphaturi Caesares inde laureas decerperent; fuitque mos triumphantibus, alias confestim eodem loco pangere; et observatum est sub cuiusque obitum arborem ab ipso institutam elanguisse. ergo novissimo Neronis anno et silva omnis exaruit radicitus, et quidquid ibi gallinarum erat interiit. ac subinde tacta de caelo Caesarum aede capita omnibus simul statuis deciderunt, Augusti etiam sceptrum e manibus excussum est.

The descendants of the Caesars ended with Nero. That it would be so was foretold by several omens, but two were especially clear. Once when Livia was staying at her Veientine estate shortly after her marriage to Augustus, an eagle flying past dropped into her lap a white hen still holding a laurel twig in its beak from when it was snatched. She chose to raise the chicken and plant the twig, and the result was an offspring of chicks so great that the villa is now called “The Henhouse,” and such a laurel grove that the Caesars used to pick laurels there for triumphs, usually planting others quickly in the same place without delay; and it was observed that before the death of each, the tree that he had begun wilted. Accordingly in Nero’s last year not only did the whole grove dry up by the root but the last of the hens died too. Then immediately afterwards the temple of the Caesars was struck by lightning and the heads toppled from all the statues at once; even Augustus’ scepter was knocked out of his hands.

Suetonius *Galba* 1

In his *Tacitus* Ronald Syme suggested the possibility that the last six biographies of Suetonius’ *Caesars* (*Galba* through *Domitian*), which are thought to form the final two of eight books,¹ may not have been part of the author’s original design, but were written later as a sequel. In Syme’s opinion the first six *Lives* seemed a self-contained hexad: “Six books, one for each ruler, embraced the Caesars in their dynastic sequence from the Dictator to Nero: a fitting term and climax, rounded off

I wish to thank Stephen Oakley and Timothy Duff for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper, as well as the anonymous referee for constructive criticism. The text followed is the Teubner edition of M. Ihm (Leipzig, 1908). All translations are my own.

1. The eight book divisions of Ihm’s Teubner are based on the evidence of the *Suda* (τ 895), for which see C. L. Roth, ed., *C. Suetoni Tranquilli quae supersunt omnia* (Leipzig, 1858), xi–xii, 283. Casaubon conjectured in 1595 that since the last six *Lives* are much shorter than the first six, Books 7 and 8 must have contained three *Lives* each; see Ihm’s Teubner, vii–ix. This results in eight books of relatively comparable length.

with a brief epilogue about a spurious Nero."² In two later papers, Syme slightly modified his theory, albeit with no less reservation or characteristic brevity.³ In both he conjectured (hesitantly) that what now stands as the beginning of *Galba* may have originally been at the end of the account of Nero, where the same material is found in Dio (63.29.3), and later transferred.

Despite the caution with which Syme offered these ideas, his later proposal that *Galba* 1 may have once belonged to *Nero* has seemed compelling, since Suetonius' chapter is about Nero and not Galba or his ancestors, and no other biography in the *Caesars* begins with a focus so removed from the subject. Even the opening of *Vespasian*, which begins *Rebellione trium principum et caede* ("After the overthrow and death of three emperors," 1.1), maintains its focus on the Flavian family. Moreover, conjectures by Syme are often influential. For these reasons the proposal has not met with much opposition from scholars. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill in his book on Suetonius and Charles Murison in his recent commentary on *Galba* both cite Syme's opinion and appear to leave open the possibility that *Galba* 1 was written as an ending to *Nero*.⁴

Furthermore, Syme is not the only scholar to have found the passage curious. The background information that it supplies must have seemed odd also to Glen Bowersock, who suggested that the last six *Lives* had been written first, which assumes a reading of *Galba* 1 as inceptive rather than continuative.⁵ Bowersock's theory was refuted by Bradley, whose comparison with *Vespasian* 1 as a similar "bridge-passage"—that is, one that presupposes knowledge of the preceding *Life*—indicated that *Galba* was written after *Nero*.⁶ Nevertheless, even if *Vespasian* provides a parallel to *Galba* 1 in this way, any presumed knowledge in the latter could equally be accounted for if it were the last chapter of *Nero*.

In light of the seemingly anomalous nature of *Galba* 1 and the conflicting theories on its composition, a reevaluation is justified. In this paper I shall argue that the passage was written specifically as the beginning of *Galba* by examining the structural unity that it creates within the triad of biographies (*Galba*, *Otho*, and *Vitellius*) that probably makes up Suetonius' seventh book, to which it functions as a prologue.

The way in which *Galba* 1 may be read as a prologue to *Galba*, *Otho*, and *Vitellius* emerges from a comparison of how Suetonius begins his other *Lives*. The biographer

2. R. Syme, *Tacitus*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1958), 2: 501; see also 779–80. The idea that the last six *Lives* were not part of Suetonius' original design has been accepted by, e.g., G. B. Townend ("Suetonius," in *Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome*, 2 vols., ed. T. J. Luce [New York, 1982], 2: 1049–61, at 1053).

3. R. Syme, "Biographers of the Caesars," *MusHelv* 37 (1980): 104–28, at 117–18, and "The Travels of Suetonius Tranquillus," *Hermes* 109 (1981): 105–17, at 117; both repr. in *Roman Papers*, vol. 3, ed. A. R. Birley (Oxford, 1984), 1251–75, at 1264–65, and 1337–49, at 1348–49 respectively.

4. A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius: The Scholar and His Caesars* (London, 1983), 62 n. 14, without discussion; C. L. Murison, ed., *Suetonius: Galba, Otho, Vitellius* (London, 1992), 24: "This chapter could equally well have served as a postscript to the *Life* of Nero." Keith Bradley, however, rejects the notion in passing in his introduction to the revised Loeb edition of Suetonius (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 1: 16–17. Yet the fact that Bradley mentions it at all is a testament to the influence of Syme's opinion.

5. G. W. Bowersock, "Suetonius and Trajan," in *Hommages à Marcel Renard*, vol. 1, ed. J. Bibauw (Brussels, 1969), 119–25; anticipated by E. Paratore (*Storia della letteratura Latina* [Florence, 1950], 743; cf. id., *Una nuova ricostruzione del "De poetis" del Suetonio*² [Bari, 1950], 194 n. 83).

6. K. R. Bradley, "The Composition of Suetonius' *Caesares* Again," *JIES* 1 (1973): 257–63; pace D. Pausch, *Biographie und Bildungskultur: Personendarstellungen bei Plinius dem Jüngeren, Gellius und Sueton* (Berlin, 2004), 252–58. On Bowersock's theory, see also the discussion of B. Baldwin in *Suetonius* (Amsterdam, 1983), 468–91.

customarily begins with the section on ancestry, introducing each new genealogical tree or branch with the word *gens* ("family"), which is his standard first heading: *gentem Octaviam* (Aug. 1.1); *patricia gens Claudia* (Tib. 1.1); *ex gente Domitia* (Ner. 1.1); *gens Flavia* (Vesp. 1.1). In some cases, this account of ancestry frames the following three *Lives*: for example, *Tiberius* 1–4, on which Suetonius also builds his *Caligula* and *Divine Claudius*; and *Vespasian* 1, which provides the most convenient parallel to our passage, since it contains the section on ancestry for the three short biographies of Book 8 (*Divine Vespasian*, *Divine Titus*, and *Domitian*) and also begins with a reference to the preceding book.⁷ However, in comparing these other beginnings we can immediately notice that *Galba* is unique, commencing not with the origin, but with the demise of a family. Furthermore, the family whose extinction it marks is not that of the biography's subject, but rather an entirely different one: the emperor's own ancestry is postponed until the next two chapters (*Galb.* 2–3); hence Syme's desire to read *Galba* 1 as an ending to *Nero*. How then does the beginning of *Galba* unify the entire book?

For the emperors of Book 7, Suetonius had no common family background on which to build, and he therefore unified the book through contrast rather than similarity. *Galba* begins with a family that has already died out, which then calls for three accounts of new ancestries (*Galb.* 2–3, *Otho* 1, and *Vit.* 1–3.1). The predication of these sections concerned with ancestry on the prologue of *Galba* is made clear from the transition that directly follows it: *Neroni Galba successit nullo gradu contingens Caesarum domum, sed haud dubie nobilissimus magnae et vetere prosapia* ("Galba succeeded Nero and was related in no degree to the household of the Caesars, but was undoubtedly of the highest birth and from great ancient stock," *Galb.* 2). Maureen Flory brings out well the consistency of theme in these two chapters:

Suetonius tells us about the omen of the hen and laurel at the beginning of the life of Galba, emphasizing the . . . impact of the end of Augustus' line on the Romans. Then he goes on to describe how Galba—"nullo gradu contingens Caesarum domum"—set up his own family stemma in the atrium of the palace and claimed he was the descendant of Jupiter and Pasiphaë, daughter of the Sun (*Gal.* 2). He created, in other words, a divine family line to rival that of his predecessors.⁸

This thematic link of a break in hereditary succession is underscored in the second chapter not only by the detail of Galba's setting up a new *stemma* ("family tree") in the palace atrium but also by the absence of the word *gens*: Suetonius refers instead to the emperor's *prosapia*.⁹ The first words of the *Otho* and *Vitellius* similarly deny the standard Suetonian heading and therefore also presuppose *Galba* 1: *Maiores Othonis* ("The ancestors of Otho," *Otho* 1.1); *Vitelliorum originem* ("The origin of the Vitellii," *Vit.* 1.1). The use of these other words implies the same connection to the

7. For *Vespasian* 1 as a prologue to Book 8, see A. W. Braithwaite, *C. Suetoni Tranquilli Divus Vespasianus* (Oxford, 1927), 19; for its similarity to *Galba* 1 in alluding to the previous *Life*, see Bradley, "Composition" (n. 6 above), 257–58.

8. M. B. Flory, "Octavian and the Omen of the *Gallina Alba*," *CJ* 84 (1988–89): 343–56, at 347.

9. Other words such as *prosapia*, *stirps*, *domus*, and especially *genus* (e.g., at *Galb.* 3.1) should not be construed as mere *variatio* or as synonymous with *gens*; the latter is used by Suetonius exclusively to designate a Roman clan: see J. C. Rolfe, "The Use of 'Gens' and 'Familia' by Suetonius," *CP* 10 (1915): 445–49.

prologue as in *Galba* 2, since Otho and Vitellius were each also *nullo gradu contingens Caesarum domum*. The sections on ancestry in all three *Lives* therefore spring from *Galba* 1.¹⁰

Unity can be seen also in the correspondence of *Galba* 1 to the ending of Book 7.¹¹ *Vitellius* (and thus the whole of Book 7) ends with an image that recalls the prologue of *Galba* (*Vit.* 18):

periit cum fratre et filio anno vitae septimo quinquagesimo; nec fefellit coniectura eorum qui augurio, quod factum ei Viennae ostendimus, non aliud portendi praedixerant quam venturum in alicuius Gallicani hominis potestatem, siquidem ab Antonio Primo adversarum partium duce oppressus est, cui Tolosae nato cognomen in pueritia Becco fuerat: id valet gallinaei rostrum.

He died, along with his brother and son, in his fifty-seventh year of life; nor was the interpretation proved false of those who predicted from the portent, which we have said befell him at Vienna, simply that he was destined to come under the control of a Gaul. For he was slain by Antonius Primus, a general of the opposing party who was born at Tolosa and in childhood had the surname Becco, meaning rooster's beak.

Suetonius clarifies the significance of a portent as having foretold the manner of the emperor's death, since Vitellius' killer was from Tolosa, which was in Gaul, and moreover he used to be called "Becco," which means *gallinaei rostrum*. The portent occurred earlier in the *Life*, and here Suetonius directs the reader with a rare first-person verb (*ostendimus*) to that section (*Vit.* 9), where the same three details appear as in the prologue of *Galba*, except in reverse order: the emperor's statues (*statuae*) crumbled with broken legs, his laurel (*laurea*) fell off, and a fowl (*gallinaeus*) landed on him. Now Suetonius adds the interpretation (punning on *gallus* as "rooster" or "Gaul")¹² of the last of these portents, which recalls the first of the prologue (*gallinam . . . ramulum lauri rostro tenentem*, *Galb.* 1). The correlation is especially pronounced since these are the only two instances in Suetonius of the singular *rostrum* to mean literally a bird's beak.¹³ Suetonius' focus on the word *Becco* is therefore not merely the scholarly interest of the author in etymology.¹⁴ In drawing attention to a fowl's *rostrum* as the last word of *Vitellius*, Suetonius gives closure to Book 7 by echoing its beginning. In addition, the fact that Suetonius withholds this interpretation for nine chapters suggests not only its relevance to Vitellius' death, but also a possible manipulation of sources to achieve unity with the prologue of the book. In framing the whole of Book 7 through the Caesars' laurel grove—a

10. It has also been suggested by Baldwin (*Suetonius* [n. 6 above], 528, 541) that commencing with Livia may be a "touch of subtle artistry," since Galba owed his rise to her *gratia* (*Galb.* 5.2), as did the grandfather of Otho (*Otho* 1.1). I should note too that the latter even grew up in her house.

11. D. T. Benediktson ("Structure and Fate in Suetonius' *Life of Galba*," *CJ* 92 [1997]: 167–73, at 170) sees a general correlation with the final chapter of *Galba* (23): "the *Galba* opens and closes with references to destruction of statues as symbolic of death." However, Galba's statue was vetoed, not destroyed, and *damnatio memoriae* is symbolically different from an omen. References to the emperors' statues are also naturally common in the *Lives*; see A. E. Wardman, "Descriptions of Personal Appearance in Plutarch and Suetonius: The Use of Statues as Evidence," *CQ*, n.s., 17 (1967): 414–20, at 419.

12. See Murison, *Galba* (n. 4 above), 152.

13. A. A. Howard and C. N. Jackson, *Index verborum C. Suetoni Tranquilli stilique eius proprietatum nonnullarum* (Cambridge, Mass., 1922), s.v. "rostrum."

14. Contra D. C. A. Shotter, ed., *Suetonius: Lives of Galba, Otho and Vitellius* (Warminster, 1993), 12.

symbol of the divine power of the *gens Iulia*¹⁵—Suetonius emphasizes the lack of divine right of the three brief emperors of 69 C.E.

We may draw a fitting comparison between our passage and *Vespasian* 1, which not only frames Book 8 by providing the section on ancestry for all three of its *Lives* but is also mirrored by the book's final passage (*Dom.* 23.2).¹⁶ Another parallel is the beginning of Plutarch's *Galba* (1–2), which serves in a more formal way as a prologue not only to that *Life* but also to his *Otho* and probably his lost *Vitellius*, suggesting a similar book division for these three biographies in Plutarch's *Lives of the Caesars*.¹⁷ But perhaps the closest analogy is Plutarch's tendency in some of his *Lives* to fashion the first section, which often includes an account of ancestry, into what has been described by Philip Stadter as an "informal prologue" or by Timothy Duff as a "proemial opening," which announces themes that are important in the rest of the *Life*.¹⁸

In conclusion, *Galba* 1 unifies both its own *Life* and the book that it begins by connecting the three emperors' lack of hereditary succession through the missing heading *gens*, which does not reappear until the *quasi vagum imperium* ("seemingly drifting empire") is finally stabilized by the *gens Flavia* (*Vesp.* 1.1). The prologue of Suetonius' *Galba* further unifies Book 7 through the recurrence of some of its details at the end of *Vitellius* (18), which, taken together with an earlier chapter to which it alludes (9), strongly echoes *Galba* 1. My conclusion lends credence to the view that Suetonius carefully structured his *Galba*, *Otho*, and *Vitellius* as a single book, and that the opening section is not out of place, since it conforms to the structure by which Suetonius unifies the rest of his *Caesars*. Although the biographies were probably written in order, it is unlikely that the passage was transferred from the end of *Nero*, due to the structural unities that we have discussed. Moreover, *Galba* 1 is an appropriate beginning, establishing a theme that runs throughout the whole of Book 7 by announcing the single greatest cause of the civil wars of that year: "The descendants of the Caesars ended with Nero." The innovation of the passage can therefore be explained by its unique subject matter: the end of the Caesars' bloodline was the starting point of a new era, as Tacitus has Galba himself declare in the first book of the *Histories* (1.16.1–2).

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15. Flory, "Octavian" (n. 8 above), 355.

16. The two vices at the beginning of Book 8 (*cupiditatis ac saevitiae*, *Vesp.* 1.1) contrast with the two virtues at the end (*abstinentia et moderatione*, *Dom.* 23.2); see C. F. Goringe, *A Study of the Death-Narratives in Suetonius' De Vita Caesarum* (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Queensland, 1993), 502–4; cf. Baldwin, *Suetonius*, 491, on *Dom.* 23.2 as "an obvious pendant to the exordium of the *Vespasian*." I should add that the beginning also mentions earlier emperors (*trium principum*), and the end later ones (*insequentium principum*).

17. Cf. A. Georgiadou, "The *Lives of the Caesars* and Plutarch's Other *Lives*," *ICS* 13 (1988): 349–56, at 354–55; T. E. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* (Oxford, 1999), 19–20; pace P. A. Stadter, "Revisiting Plutarch's *Lives of the Caesars*," in *Valori letterari delle Opere di Plutarco: Studi offerti al Professore Italo Gallo dall'International Plutarch Society*, ed. A. Pérez Jiménez and F. Titchener (Málaga, 2005), 419–35, at 420.

18. P. A. Stadter, "The Proems of Plutarch's *Lives*," *ICS* 13 (1988): 275–95. For a critique of Stadter's concept of informal prologues, see T. E. Duff, "How *Lives* Begin," in *The Unity of Plutarch's Work: "Moralia" Themes in the "Lives," Features of the "Lives" in the "Moralia,"* ed. A. G. Nikolaidis (Berlin, 2008), 187–207.