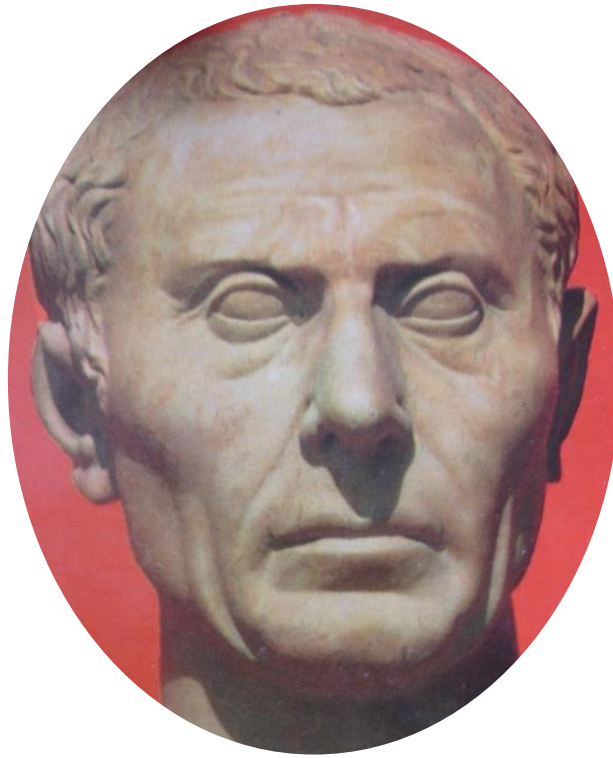


BELLARIA (X)



Suetonius AD 69-after AD 122

'Bellaria' means 'sweets, dainties', and in these hard times Classics for All will try to lighten the mood and put a spring in the step by posting delicious extracts from ancient literature, the original text followed by a translation or translations, and very occasionally with explanatory notes.

Tom Holland is currently translating Suetonius' de vita Caesarum for Penguin Classics. Like Suetonius, he is thoroughly in favour of Classics for All, and would be delighted if CfA were to run the rule over his first draft (he is currently up to Vespasian). So the next five Bellaria will feature scenes from Suetonius in Tom's translation. One of his stated aims is to keep as close as possible to Suetonius' word-order.

This is the last of the extracts from Tom Holland's first drafts of his forthcoming translation for Penguin. Classics for All is extremely grateful to Tom for allowing our supporters to peep into this work in progress and much looks forward to the finished article (summer 2021).

SCENES FROM SUETONIUS (5)



Domitian, emperor AD 81-96

Each of Suetonius' *Lives of the Emperors* follows a roughly similar pattern: birth and ancestry, early life and career, good and bad features, conduct, political, military and other achievements, death, other minor details, all decorated with copious illustrative anecdotes. The lack of clear chronology and of any sense of the person as a whole creates serious problems for the historian.

The following passages come immediately after the description of Domitian's death at the hands of members of his internal staff, and are followed by the announcement of senatorial *damnatio memoriae*. The paranoid Domitian has indeed been known as one of the cruellest of emperors, in contrast to his brother Titus and father Vespasian. But the sheer banality of the details here reminds one of Hannah Arendt's description of the 'terrifying normality' of Adolph Eichmann.

Appearance

[18] He was a tall man, and had the appearance of a modest one, prone as he was to blushing; his eyes were large but his vision was poor; additionally, although very good-looking and well-proportioned, especially when young, he was let down by his feet, which had toes that curled in a bit—nor, as he grew older, did this remain his only physical defect, for he also lost his hair and sprouted a protruding belly, while his legs, which had weakened over the course of a lengthy illness, were spindly. So alert was he to the advantages that accrued to him from his natural modesty of expression that he once boasted to the senate, 'Up until now, at any rate, there can be no doubting that you have thought well of both my character and my looks.'

So sensitive was he about his baldness that he would take it as a personal insult should anyone else who had lost his hair be mocked or jeered for it—

although, in a small book he wrote for a friend on the theme of hair and its maintenance, he did attempt to console both himself and his friend by including the following passage: ‘Do you not see how fair I am too, and tall?’ † Young though I am, yet I bear with fortitude the thinning of my hair ‡: for I know the fate it suffers is the fate that awaits me too. Know, then, that there is nothing more delightful than beauty—and nothing more fleeting either.’

† Iliad 21.108, said by Achilles

‡ Martial, who dedicated some of his books of poetry to Domitian, composed scathing epigrams on those who tried to cover up their bald patches; one poem mocking a man with a bald patch specifically mentioned the emperor.



Portrait Head of a Balding Man, Roman, ~ A.D. 240.
Marble, Paul Getty Museum, 85.AA.112

[18] *statura fuit procera, uultu modesto ruborisque pleno, grandibus oculis, uerum acie hebetiore; pulcher ac decens, maxime in iuuenta, et quidem toto corpore, exceptis pedibus, quorum digitos restrictiores habebat; postea caluitio quoque deformis et obesitate uentris et crurum gracilitate, quae tamen ei ualitudine longa remacruerant. commendari se uerecundia oris adeo sentiebat, ut apud senatum sic quondam iactauerit: ‘usque adhuc certe et animum meum probastis et uultum.’*

caluitio ita offendebar, ut in contumeliam suam traheret, si cui alii ioco uel iurgio obiectaretur; quamuis libello, quem de cura capillorum ad amicum edidit, haec etiam, simul illum seque consolans, inseruerit: ‘οὐχ ὀράας, οἷος κἀγὼ καλός τε μέγας τε; eadem me tamen manent capillorum fata, et forti animo fero comam in adulescentia senescentem. scias nec gratius quicquam decore nec breuius.’

Suetonius, Life of Domitian 18



Archers from Trajan's column

Physical skills

[19] He was not a great one for exercise: in Rome he rarely went anywhere on foot, while in the field, whether on the march or fighting a battle, he much preferred being carried in a litter to sitting in the saddle. He had no interest in practising with the weapons used by regular soldiers,† but was a great enthusiast for archery.* Indeed, at his retreat among the Alban hills, large numbers of people would gather to watch him fell a hundred animals of every kind—and sometimes, targeting the heads of his victims with a pair of arrows, he would make it seem that the creatures had sprouted horns. Sometimes as well he would have a slave-boy stand at a distance holding up a right hand with the fingers outspread to serve him as a target, and so skilfully could he fire his arrows that they would land safely in the gaps between the fingers.‡

†None of this is very complimentary for an emperor, especially when contrasted with his brother Titus (whom he disliked) and father Vespasian, both of course much admired

‡Titus too was skilled with the bow: we are told he killed twelve of the defenders during the attack on Jerusalem

Tom Holland (first draft 2020)

[19] *laboris impatiens, pedibus per urbem non temere ambulavit, in expeditione et agmine equo rarius, lectica assidue uectus est. armorum nullo, sagittarum uel praecipuo studio tenebatur. centenas uarii generis feras saepe in Albano secessu conficientem spectauere plerique, atque etiam ex industria ita quarundam capita figentem, ut duobus ictibus quasi cornus efficeret. nonnumquam in pueri procul stantis, praebentisque (pro scopulo) dispansam dexterae manus palmam, sagittas tanta arte derexit, ut omnes per interualla digitorum innocue euaderent.*

Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 19



'I think I'll use my
dictaphone'

The 'Virgil Mosaic', Virgil
holding Aeneid flanked by
Clio & Melpomene
(cropped), c 3rd c.AD,
Bardo National Museum

Education

[20] He had no time for the liberal arts when he first became emperor, although he did take care to restore at enormous expense some libraries that had been destroyed in a fire, searching for copies of the lost works all over the place, and sending agents to Alexandria to transcribe those texts that had gone up in flames and to correct the damaged ones. Even so, he never made any effort to familiarise himself with the basics of written style required of an emperor, † let alone history or poetry; nor—with the sole exception of the memoirs and decrees of Tiberius Caesar—did he ever read anything more than once, and always, if he had letters, or speeches, or edicts that needed writing, would rely on the talents of others.

That said, his conversation did not lack for a certain elegance, and on occasion he might even say something memorable: 'I only wish that I were as handsome as Maecius thinks he is', for instance, or the time he described the head of a man whose reddish hair was turning white as resembling 'mead poured out onto snow'.

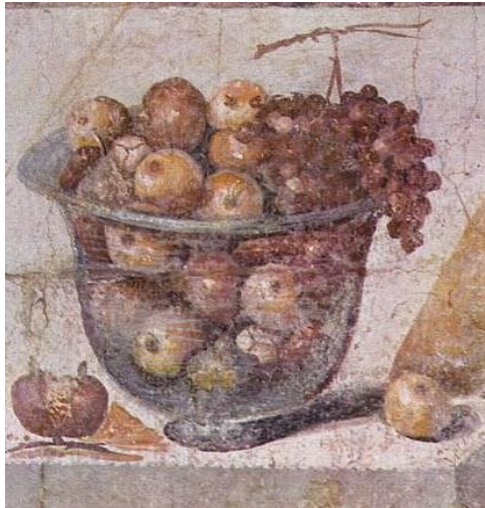
[21] 'How wretched,' he used to say, 'is the lot of a princeps, for the only time that people believe him when he reports the uncovering of a conspiracy is if he ends up actually murdered.'

†Or rather 'the [technical] writing that his duties demanded'; cf. 'needed writing' in the next sentence

[20] *liberalia studia imperii initio neglexit, quamquam bibliothecas incendio absumptas impensissime reparare curasset, exemplaribus undique petitis, missisque Alexandream qui describerent emendarentque. numquam tamen aut historiae carminibusque noscendis operam ullam aut stilo uel necessario dedit. praeter commentarios et acta Tiberii Caesaris nihil lectitabat; epistolas orationesque et edicta alieno formabat ingenio. sermonis tamen nec inelegantis, dictorum interdum etiam notabilium, 'uellem,' inquit, 'tam formosus esse, quam Maetius sibi uidetur'; et cuiusdam caput uarietate capilli subrutilum et incanum, 'perfusam niuem mulso' dixit.*

[21] *condicionem principum miserrimam aiebat, quibus de coniuratione comperta non crederetur nisi occisis.*

Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 20-21



Wall painting depicting still life,
The House of Julia Felix, pre-AD 79, Pompeii

Relaxation

[21] Whenever he had the time he would amuse himself by playing dice† (even if it were a normal working day or in the early hours of the morning); baths he would take during the course of the day, and lunches‡ he would enjoy until his stomach was full, so that often, at dinner, he would have nothing more than a Matian apple* and a drink of wine from a tiny flask. He regularly hosted lavish dinner parties, but these rarely went on late (certainly never past sunset), nor were they followed by drinking games. Instead, you see, he never did anything before retiring to bed except walk in some secluded spot, alone.

† Gambling was technically illegal, even if many of the emperors enjoyed it

‡ It was normal to take prandium at the sixth hour after sunrise, then bathe, and take cena at the ninth or tenth

*Gaius Matius, a friend of Augustus, wrote three books on cookery as well as developing this variety of apple

Tom Holland (first draft 2020)

[21] *quotiens otium esset, alea se oblectabat, etiam profestis diebus matutinisque horis, ac lauabat de die, prandebatque ad satietatem, ut non temere super cenam praeter Matianum malum et modicam in ampulla potiunculam sumeret. conuiuabatur frequenter ac large, sed paene raptim; certe non ultra solis occasum, nec ut postea comisaretur. nam ad horam somni nihil aliud quam solus secreto deambulabat.*

Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 21



This is an extract selected for you as part of Classics for All's 'Bellaria' series to cheer us up during the COVID-19 pandemic. The full series of weekly instalments may be found on our website classicsforall.org.uk/bellaria/