

Discussion Questions for *The Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius

Introduction: Suetonius covers a period of approximately 200 years in his work *The Twelve Caesars*, beginning with the reign of Julius Caesar (who was born in 100 BC), and ending with Domitian, who died in 96 AD. Plutarch covered many of the same men in his *Lives*, and provided similar anecdotes about many of the Caesars. Plutarch was concerned with discovering men's morals and character; Suetonius covers these same men as Roman leaders, and is not so much interested in their character or morals, although he does list some of the more disreputable acts committed by a number of them.

1. Why were a number of the Caesars (Julius, Augustus, Claudius, Vespasian and Titus) deified? Was the deification justified? Why or why not?
2. Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Galba, Otho and Domitian seem to be execrable men. Why do you think the Romans tolerated them for as long as they did?
3. A number of the Emperors, notably Galba, Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian were elected by the Roman troops, only to become the victim of plots and assassination attempts by troops. Why were these men unable to keep the loyalty of the troops? Did they attempt to buy the loyalty of the Roman troops, and if so, why did the troops turn against them so readily?
4. After the Emperor Augustus, the quality and character of the Caesars went steadily downhill. Did Augustus choose Tiberius as his successor in order to enhance his reputation? Did each of the succeeding Caesars attempt to choose a lesser man than he was in order to enhance his reputation? Was there some other reason for the decline in the morality and character of the later Caesars?
5. Claudius was often portrayed as a fool in the Roman courts as well as by the general populace. Why was he deified? Is he thought of as being good because he served between Caligula and Nero, and he was better by comparison?
6. One of the traits of all of the Caesars (with the possible exception of Claudius) was a desire for glory, power and honor. Did their ruthless behavior sometimes work against them?
7. The lives of the Caesars was marked by plotting, political machinations and assassinations. Would you have liked to live in Rome during the time of the Caesars? Why or why not?
8. One of the myths that sprang up about Nero was that he burned Rome and fiddled while it burned. This myth seems to have some credence in the writing of Suetonius. Do you believe that Nero was partly responsible for burning Rome at least two times? Why or why not?
9. Which of the Caesars (if any) do you find to be the best ruler? Why? Can you provide details?