

# **The Lives of the Caesars: Otho**

Suetonius



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# The Lives of the Caesars: Otho

## Suetonius

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*Translated by J. C. Rolfe.*

**I.** THE ancestors of Otho came from an old and illustrious family in the town of Ferentium and were descended from the princes of Etruria. His grandfather Marcus Salvius Otho, whose father was a Roman eques but whose mother was of lowly origin and perhaps not even free-born, became a senator through the influence of Livia Augusta, in whose house he was reared; but did not advance beyond the grade of praetor. His father Lucius Otho was of a distinguished family on his mother's side, with many powerful connections, and was so beloved by Tiberius and so like him in appearance, that he was believed by many to be the emperor's son. In the regular offices at Rome, the proconsulate of Africa, and several special military commands, he conducted himself with extreme severity. In Illyricum he even had the courage to punish some soldiers with death, because in the rebellion of Camillus [*See Claud. xiii and xxv.2*], repenting of their defection, they had killed their officers on the ground that they were the ringleaders in the revolt against Claudius; and they were executed in his presence before his headquarters, although he knew that they had been promoted to higher positions by Claudius because of that very act. By this deed, while he increased his reputation, he lost favor at court; but he speedily regained it by detecting the treachery of a Roman eques, whose slaves betrayed their master's design of killing the emperor. For in consequence of this, the Senate conferred a very unusual honor on him by setting up his statue in the Palace; and Claudius also enrolled him among the patricians, and after praising him in the highest terms, added these words: "a man of greater loyalty than I can even pray for in my own children." By Albia Terentia, a woman of an illustrious line, he had two sons, Lucius Titianus, and a younger called Marcus, who had the same surname as himself; also a daughter, whom he betrothed to Drusus, son of Germanicus, almost before she was of marriageable age.

**II.** The emperor Otho was born on the fourth day before the Kalends of May in the consulate of Camillus Arruntius and Domitius Ahenobarbus [*April 28, 32 C.E.*]. From earliest youth he was so extravagant and wild that his father often flogged him; and they say that he used to rove about at night and lay hands on anyone whom he met who was feeble or drunk and toss him in a blanket [*Instead of the modern blanket, a "sagum", or military cloak, was used, whence the operation was called "sagatio"*]. After his father's death he pretended love for an influential freedwoman of the court, although she was an old woman and almost decrepit, that he might more effectually win her favor. Having through her wormed his way into Nero's good graces, he easily held the first place among the emperor's friends because of the similarity of their characters; but according to some, also through immoral relations. At any rate his influence was such, that when he had bargained for a huge sum of money to procure the pardon of an ex-consul who had been condemned for extortion, he had no hesitation in bringing him into the Senate to give thanks, before he had fully secured his restoration [*The penalty for extortion was expulsion from the Senate; see Jul. xliii.1*].

**III.** He was privy to all the emperor's plans and secrets and on the day which Nero had chosen for the murder of his mother he gave both of them a most elaborate banquet, in order to avert suspicion.

Also when Poppaea Sabina, who up to that time had been Nero's mistress, was separated from her husband and turned over for the time being to Otho, he pretended marriage with her [*According to Tac., Ann. 13.45, the marriage was a real one, as is also implied below*]; but not content with seducing her, he became so devoted that he could not endure the thought of having Nero even as a rival. At all events it is believed that he not only would not admit those whom Nero sent to fetch her, but that on one occasion he even shut out the emperor himself, who stood before his door, vainly mingling threats and entreaties and demanding the return of his trust. Therefore,

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Nero annulled the marriage and under color of an appointment as governor banished Otho to Lusitania, contenting himself with this through fear that by inflicting a severer punishment he would make the whole farce public; but even as it was, it was published abroad in this couplet: "Why, do you ask, in feigned honor does Otho in banishment languish? With his own wedded wife he had begun an intrigue."

With the rank of quaestor Otho governed the province for ten years with remarkable moderation and integrity.

**IV.** When at last an opportunity for revenge was given him, Otho was the first to espouse Galba's causes, at the same time conceiving on his own account high hopes of imperial power, because of the state of the times, but still more because of a declaration of the astrologer Seleukos [*Tacitus and Plutarch give "Ptolemaios" as the name of the astrologer*]. For he had not only promised Otho some time before that he would survive Nero, but had at this time unexpectedly appeared unsought and made the further promise, that he would soon become emperor as well. Accordingly, Otho let slip no opportunity for flattery or attention to anyone. Whenever he entertained the *princeps* at dinner, he gave a gold piece to each man of the cohort on guard, and put all the soldiers under obligation in one form or another. Chosen arbiter by a man who was at law with his neighbor about a part of his estate, he bought the whole property and presented it to him. As a result there was hardly anyone who did not both think and openly declare that he alone was worthy to succeed to the empire.

**V.** Now he had hoped to be adopted by Galba, and looked forward to it from day to day. But when Piso was preferred and he at last lost that hope, he resorted to force, spurred on not merely by feelings of resentment, but also by the greatness of his debts. For he flatly declared that he could not keep on his feet unless he became emperor, and that it made no difference whether he fell at the hands of the enemy in battle or at those of his creditors in the Forum. He had extorted a million sesterces from one of the emperor's slaves a few days before for getting him a stewardship. This was the entire capital for his great undertaking. At first the enterprise was entrusted to five of his body-guard, then to ten others, two being chosen by each of the first five; to all of them ten thousand sesterces were paid at once and they were promised fifty thousand more. Through these others were won over, but not so very many, since he had full confidence that more would join him when the business was afoot.

**VI.** He had been inclined to seize the Camp immediately after the adoption, and set upon Galba as he was dining in the Palace, but had been prevented by consideration for the cohort which was on guard at the time, and a reluctance to increase its ill repute; for it was while that same cohort was at its post that both Galba had been slain and Nero had been forsaken. The intervening time [*Between the adoption and the death of Galba, a space of five days*] was lost owing to bad omens and the warnings of Seleukos. Accordingly, when the day was set, after admonishing his confederates to await him in the Forum at the golden milestone [*A pillar covered with gilded bronze, erected by Augustus, in 20 B.C.E., on which were engraved the names of the principal cities of the empire and their distance from Rome. The Roman roads were supposed to converge at that point, but the distances on them were reckoned from the gates*] hard by the Temple of Saturn, he called upon Galba in the morning and was welcomed as usual with a kiss. He also attended the emperor as he was offering sacrifice, and heard the predictions of the soothsayer. Then a freedman announced that the architects had come, which was the signal agreed on, and going off as if to inspect a house which was for sale, he rushed from the Palace by a back door and hastened to the appointed place. Others say that he feigned an attack of fever and asked those who stood near him to give that excuse, in case he should be missed. Then hurriedly entering a closed litter, such as women use, he hurried to the camp, but got out when the bearers' strength flagged, and started to run. His shoe came untied and he stopped, whereupon without delay he was at once taken up on the shoulders of his companions and hailed as emperor. In this way he arrived at headquarters, amid acclamations and drawn swords, while everyone whom he met fell in, just as though he were an accomplice and a participator in the plot. He then sent emissaries to kill Galba and Piso, and made no further promises in the assembly to win the loyalty of the soldiers than to declare that he would have that—and only that—which they should leave to him.

**VII.** Next, as the day was drawing to its close, he entered the Senate and after giving a brief account of himself, alleging that he had been carried off in the streets and forced to undertake the rule, which he would exercise in accordance with the general will, he went to the Palace. When in the midst of the other adulations of those who congratulated and flattered him, he was hailed by the common herd as Nero, he made no sign of dissent; on the contrary, according to some writers, he even made use of that surname in his commissions and his first letters to some of the governors of the provinces. Certain it is that he suffered Nero's busts and statues to be

set up again, and reinstated his procurators and freedmen in their former posts, while the first grant that he signed as emperor was one of fifty million sesterces for finishing the Golden House. It is said that he had a fearful dream that night, uttered loud groans, and was found by those who ran to his aid lying on the ground beside his couch; that he tried by every kind of expiatory rite to propitiate the shade of Galba, by whom he dreamt that he was ousted and thrown out; and that next day, as he was taking the auspices, a great storm arose and he had a bad fall, whereat he muttered from time to time: "With long pipes what concern have I? [*Proverbial of undertaking something beyond one's powers; cf., Cic. Ad Att. ii.16*].

**VIII.** Now at about this same time the armies in Germania swore allegiance to Vitellius. When Otho learned of this, he persuaded the Senate to send a deputation, to say that an emperor had already been chosen and to counsel peace and harmony; but in spite of this he offered Vitellius by messengers and letters a share in the imperial dignity and proposed to become his son-in-law. But when it became clear that war was inevitable, and the generals and troops which Vitellius had sent in advance were already drawing near, he was given a proof of the affection and loyalty of the Praetorians towards himself which almost resulted in the destruction of the Senate. It had been resolved that some arms should be removed and carried back on shipboard by the marines; but as these were being taken out in the Camp towards nightfall, some suspected treachery and started a riot; then on a sudden all the soldiers hastened to the Palace without any particular leader, demanding the death of the Senators. After putting to flight some of the tribunes who attempted to stop them, and killing others, just as they were, all blood-stained, they burst right into the dining-room, demanding to know where the emperor was; and they could not be quieted until they had seen him. He began his expedition with energy and in fact too hastily, without any regard even for the omens, and in spite of the fact that the sacred shields had been taken out [*From the Temple of Mars, to be carried through the streets in the sacred procession. To begin any enterprise during that time was considered unlucky, and weddings were avoided; see Ovid, Fasti, iii.393*], but not yet put back, which for ages has been considered unlucky; on the very day, too, when the worshippers of the Mother of the Gods [*Kybele, whose festival was from March 24 to 30*] begin their wailing and lamentation, and also with most unfavorable auspices. For having offered up a victim to Dis Pater, he had good omens, whereas in such a sacrifice adverse indications are more favorable; and when he first left the city, he was delayed by floods of the Tiber, while at the twentieth milestone he found the road blocked by fallen buildings.

**IX.** With like rashness, although no one doubted that the proper course was to protract the war, since the enemy were hard pressed by hunger and by the narrowness of their quarters, he decided to fight a decisive battle as soon as possible, either because he could not endure the continued worry and hoped that the war could be ended before the arrival of Vitellius, or from inability to resist the impetuosity of his soldiers, who clamored for the fight. He himself did not take part in any of the battles, but remained behind at Brixellum. He was victorious in three contests, but they were of little moment: in the Alps, near Placentia, and "at Castor's," as the place is called. In the final and decisive struggle at Betriacum he was defeated, but through treachery. For hope of a conference was offered, and when his soldiers were led out in the belief that they were to discuss terms of peace, a battle was forced upon them unexpectedly, just as they were exchanging greetings with the foe. After the defeat, Otho at once resolved to take his own life, rather from a feeling of shame, as many have thought with good reason, and an unwillingness to persist in a struggle for imperial power at the expense of such danger to life and property, than from any despair of success or distrust of his troops; for even then he had a fresh and strong force which he had held in reserve for a second attempt, while others were on their way from Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Moesia. Even the defeated troops were not so crushed as not to undergo any danger, and even without support undertake to avenge their disgrace.

**X.** My father Suetonius Laetus took part in that war, as a tribune of the equestrian order in the Thirteenth legion. He used often to declare afterwards that Otho, even when he was a private citizen, so loathed civil strife, that at the mere mention of the fate of Brutus and Cassius at a banquet he shuddered; that he would not have engaged with Galba, if he had not felt confident that the affair could be settled peacefully; further, that he was led to hold his life cheap at that time by the example of a common soldier. This man, on bringing news of the defeat of the army, was believed by no one, but was charged by the soldiers now with falsehood and now with cowardice, and accused of running away; whereupon he fell on his sword at the emperor's feet. My father used to say that at this sight Otho cried out that he would no longer endanger the lives of such brave men, who had deserved so well. Having therefore advised his brother, his nephew, and his friends one by one to look out each

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for his own safety as best they could, he embraced and kissed them all and sent them off. Then, going to a retired place he wrote two notes, one of consolation to his sister, and one to Nero's widow Messalina, whom he had intended to marry, commending to her his corpse and his memory. Then he burned all his letters, to prevent them from bringing danger or harm to anyone at the hands of the victor. He also distributed what money he had with him among his servants

**XI.** When he had thus made his preparations and was now resolved upon death, learning from a disturbance which meantime arose that those who were beginning to depart and leave the camp were being seized and detained as deserters, he said "Let us add this one more night to our life" (these were his very words), and he forbade the offering of violence to anyone. Leaving the door of his bedroom open until a late hour, he gave the privilege of speaking with him to all who wished to come in. After that, quenching his thirst with a draught of cold water, he caught up two daggers, and having tried the point of both of them, put one under his pillow. Then closing the doors, he slept very soundly. When he at last woke up at about daylight, he stabbed himself with a single stroke under the left breast; and now concealing the wound, and now showing it to those who rushed in at his first groan, he breathed his last and was hastily buried (for such were his orders) in the thirty–eighth year of his age and on the ninety–fifth day of his reign.

**XII.** Neither Otho's person nor his bearing suggested such great courage. He is said to have been of moderate height, splay–footed and bandy–legged, but almost feminine in his care of his person. He had the hair of his body plucked out, and because of the thinness of his locks wore a wig so carefully fashioned and fitted to his head, that no one suspected it. Moreover, they say that he used to shave every day and smear his face with moist bread, beginning the practice with the appearance of the first down, so as never to have a beard; also that he used to celebrate the rites of Isis publicly in the linen garment prescribed by the cult. I am inclined to think that it was because of these habits that a death so little in harmony with his life excited the greater marvel. Many of the soldiers who were present kissed his hands and feet as he lay dead, weeping bitterly and calling him the bravest of men and an incomparable emperor, and then at once slew themselves beside his bier. Many of those who were absent too, on receiving the news, attacked and killed one another from sheer grief. In short, the greater part of those who had hated him most bitterly while he lived lauded him to the skies when he was dead; and it was even commonly declared that he had put an end to Galba, not so much for the sake of ruling as of restoring the republic and liberty.

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