

Physiognomy, the art of interpreting character from personal appearance, reached its height in the 2nd c. AD. In early Greek and Roman works of historiography the physical appearance of people was not widely discussed or noted. Suetonius, however, includes descriptions in each of the Lives of the Caesars. The physical descriptions, such as his concern for the color of Augustus' hair or Caligula's leg proportions, illustrate his knowledge of the pseudo-science of physiognomy in the 2nd century AD as an extension of the moral character of the particular person. These descriptions are diverse as he does not describe each emperor in the same fashion. His descriptions appear to relate physical descriptions with character, while others do not seem to correlate traits with character. Based on other sources of physical descriptions, we can understand how Suetonius arrived at his conclusions employing the sources available to him. Since Suetonius was equipped with the knowledge of physiognomy, the paper will discuss how his descriptions correspond to the physiognomic assumptions of the day. I will not discuss the topic at length but rather introduce the subject of ancient physiognomy as it influenced Suetonius' writings. His career overlapped with Polemo of Laodicea (88 AD- 145 AD), who wrote the most important handbook on physiognomy, which was written in Greek and only survives in Arabic. I will demonstrate further how Suetonius' work parallels Polemo's writings as a "how-to-manual" on applying the principles of physiognomy. Based on these observations, a biographer could classify the reign of an emperor as either negative or positive.