

# CALIGULA ON AUGUSTUS' ALLEGED INCEST WITH JULIA

In a section describing the attitude of Caligula towards his ancestors, Suetonius claims that he refused to admit that Marcus Agrippa had been his grandfather, to the extent that he even used to claim that his mother Agrippina had been born as a result of incest between Augustus and his daughter Julia (Calig. 23,1):

He did not wish to be thought the grandson of Agrippa, or called so, because of the latter's humble origin; and he grew very angry if anyone in a speech or a song included Agrippa among the ancestors of the Cae-

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8) Some translate ἡδονὴ ... συνουσίας as “pleasure in her company” (M. Balme, *Menander. The Plays and Fragments*, Oxford / New York 2001, 275, or “some pleasure in companionship” in F. G. Allinson, *Menander. The Principal Fragments*, Westport CT 1970 [repr. of 1921], 487). But can simple companionship, however pleasurable, lead to one's ruin (ἀπόλωλε)? Contrast Görgemanns in: H. Görgemanns / B. Feichtinger / F. Graf / W. Jeanrond / J. Opsomer, *Plutarch. Dialog über die Liebe* (Sapere X), Tübingen 2006, 163 n. 270 (“sexuelle Lust”).

9) Cf. Sandbach's translation: “this disease comes when the heart is ready”.

10) For a detailed discussion of this fragment see A. G. Nikolaidis, *Plutarch's Fragments on Love*, in: J. M<sup>a</sup> Nieto Ibáñez / R. López López (eds.), *El amor en Plutarco*, León 2007, 133–136; and especially in connection with the meaning of καιρός, 134 note 6.

11) With respect to sense, the suggestion of Papabasileiou (οἶδεν ἦ) is not very far from ἐκὼν. The other propositions apparently take for granted the meaning of the passage in Stobaeus (including εἰς ὃ δεῖ and εἰς ὅλην, i. e. τὴν ψυχὴν), and only try to emend it metrically.

sars. He even boasted that his own mother was born in incest, which Augustus had committed with his daughter Julia; ...<sup>1</sup>

As has been pointed out on numerous occasions, the initial premise here that Caligula had refused to admit that Agrippa had been his grandfather is completely false.<sup>2</sup> The inscription which Caligula had placed on Agrippina's funerary urn (CIL 6.886), his issue of coins commemorating the memory of Agrippa,<sup>3</sup> and a passage in a letter sent by the Jewish noble Julius Agrippa to Caligula, as quoted by Philo (Leg. 294), where Julius describes Marcus Agrippa as the emperor's grandfather and praises his treatment of the Jews, all prove that Caligula was not the least ashamed of his descent from Marcus Agrippa. So what is one to make of the associated claim that Caligula had boasted of his descent from the incestuous union of Augustus and his daughter? Here one needs to admit that it is not impossible that Augustus may have committed incest with his daughter, since it is an ugly fact that some men do treat their daughters in this way. However, such behaviour is not common, and one needs rather stronger evidence than currently exists to convict Augustus on such a serious charge.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, what concerns us here is not so much the allegation of incest itself as the allegation that Caligula was proud to boast of his descent from such an act.

While most commentators dismiss the allegation of incest itself, some argue that Caligula's alleged behaviour in boasting of it was a symptom of his madness.<sup>5</sup> However, it is not clear that Caligula really was 'mad', whatever exactly one means by this, since many of the allegations traditionally used to prove this may be explained otherwise.<sup>6</sup> Other commentators argue that he was keen to strengthen his hold upon the throne by stressing the purity of his descent in the manner of various Hellenistic kings, the Ptolemies of Egypt in particular.<sup>7</sup> However, while it has

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1) Trans. by J. C. Rolfe, Suetonius I, Cambridge, Mass. 1913, 436–39.

2) See e.g. J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius (Caligula)*, Oxford 1934, 30; D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: A Commentary*, Brussels 1994, 217–18.

3) See J. Nicols, *The Chronology and Significance of the M. Agrippa Asses*, *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes* 19 (1974) 65–86.

4) Such behaviour is not impossible to believe of a man who apparently delighted in deflowering virgins in his old age (Suet. Aug. 71). However, this allegation remains as questionable as many of the other tales of imperial sexual excess in which Suetonius seems to delight.

5) Hence E. Fantham, *Julia Augusti: The Emperor's Daughter*, Abingdon 2006, 128, accepts that Caligula did boast of his descent from an incestuous union, but explains it on the basis that "the man was mad, and probably no contemporary believed him". There is a large bibliography on the 'madness' of Caligula. See Z. Yavetz, *Caligula, Imperial Madness and Modern Historiography*, *Klio* 78 (1996) 105–29.

6) Various allegations allow of different explanations. See e.g. D. Woods, *Caligula's Seashells*, *G&R* 47 (2000) 80–87; idem, *Concealing Caligula's Epilepsy*, in: C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History XIV*, Brussels 2008, 306–12.

7) See e.g. B. Levick, *Claudius*, London 1990, 44; R. A. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, London 1992, 159; D. W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' Life of C. Caligula*, Atlanta 1993, 92.

sometimes been argued that Caligula did model his behaviour on what he believed to be the Hellenistic style of kingship, the evidence is ambiguous at best, and such an interpretation of his reign fails to take sufficient account of the hostile nature of the surviving sources (or of their sources in turn) who sought to portray him in this way precisely in order to destroy his reputation.<sup>8</sup>

That brings us to the alternative approach to the claim that Caligula used to boast of his descent from the incestuous union of Augustus and Julia, the dismissal of it as 'hostile propaganda'.<sup>9</sup> This is true in so far as whoever first propagated this story must have been hostile to Caligula at least, if not to Augustus also, but one needs to proceed beyond a simple dismissal of the allegation as propaganda to ask what the basis for this propaganda was. It is unlikely that the author of this hostile tale invented it all from scratch. The more probable explanation is that he misunderstood some account of Caligula's actions, his original words even, and put the worst possible interpretation upon them in accordance with his more general prejudices against him. In particular, he may well have been influenced by rumours that Caligula had had an incestuous relationship with all three of his sisters, with Drusilla as his favourite.<sup>10</sup> Depending when he was writing, he may also have been influenced by the fact that Caligula's successor, his uncle Claudius, did indeed engage in incest when he married his niece Agrippina, Caligula's sister, in AD 49.<sup>11</sup> If he wrote later again, he may even have been influenced by the rumours that Agrippina had engaged in incest with her son Nero.<sup>12</sup> Hence there was a great deal of material in circulation already that may well have disposed the author of this hostile tale to believe that Caligula would have approved of incest, if he came across something that could have been misinterpreted to suggest such. So what might he have so misunderstood to mean that Caligula boasted of his descent from the incestuous union of Augustus and Julia? Barrett has suggested that he misunderstood "some casual joke in poor taste" by Caligula, but does not attempt to explain the joke.<sup>13</sup> Wood supports this theory of a misunderstood joke, suggesting that it was intended as "an ironic observation on the oddities that legal adoption could introduce into a fami-

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8) For the argument that Caligula did attempt to emulate a Hellenistic style of kingship, see G. W. Adams, *The Roman Emperor Gaius 'Caligula' and His Hellenistic Aspirations*, Boca Raton 2007. Unfortunately, Adams barely notes Caligula's alleged boast of his descent from the incestuous union of Augustus and his daughter (pp. 64, 224), so that it is not clear how he interprets this allegation.

9) Wardle (above, n. 2) 218. In many cases, the propaganda began immediately after the death of Caligula. See E. S. Ramage, *Denigration of Predecessor under Claudius, Galba, and Vespasian*, *Historia* 32 (1983) 201–14, esp. 202–04.

10) Joseph. *Ant. Iud.* 19,204; Suet. *Calig.* 24; Dio 59,3,6; 11,1; 22,6; 26,5. As Wardle (above, n. 2) 225 points out, the rumours that Caligula committed incest with his sisters were probably due to the unusual honours which he conferred upon them, not least his depiction of them upon his coinage.

11) Suet. *Claud.* 26,3; Dio 60,31,6–8.

12) Suet. *Nero* 28,2; Tac. *Ann.* 14,2; Dio 61,11,3–4.

13) A. A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power*, London 1989, 217–18. H. Lindsay, *Suetonius: Caligula*, London 1993, 106, concurs that this and similar stories "may represent examples of his [Caligula's] perverse sense of humour, if they have any basis at all".

ly tree”, but does not explain further.<sup>14</sup> However, while the theory of a misunderstood joke may well work in the case of other bizarre statements or actions attributed to Caligula, it is not necessary in this case.

Let us assume that much of the substance of what Suetonius reports is correct, that Caligula did indeed boast about his descent from the relevant union, and that this union did indeed involve Augustus and a lady named Julia. But which Julia? The key point here is that Augustus’ wife Livia took the name Julia Augusta following her adoption by Augustus into the Julian clan in his will in AD 14, and this remained her official name until her death in AD 29.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, subsequent generations of Roman historians sometimes treated her names very differently. For example, Tacitus is normally very correct, styling her Livia when describing her activities before her adoption (e. g. Ann. 1,1; 1,5) and usually either Augusta (e. g. Ann. 2,77; 3,15; 4,16) or Julia Augusta (Ann. 3,64; 5,1) when describing her activities after her adoption, although he can refer to her as Julia alone (Ann. 3,64). However, his contemporary Suetonius can refer to her as Julia Augusta (Calig. 16,3) and Livia Augusta (Calig. 10,1; 15,2; 23,2) within the same life even, while generally preferring to refer to her simply as Livia, regardless of the period to which his statement refers (e. g. Tib. 50,2; Claud. 11,2). More importantly, her contemporary Valerius Maximus calls her Julia alone (6,1, praef.). Hence there was plenty of opportunity for confusion.<sup>16</sup> In so far as the story transmitted by Suetonius claims to be based on something that Caligula himself had used to say, then Caligula’s own usage is crucial here. How would he have usually referred to Livia? Given that he was only born in AD 12, Caligula would presumably have been accustomed to hearing Livia described as Julia from his earliest childhood. To this extent, it would probably have been most natural for him to refer to her as Julia, whatever the occasion. I suggest, therefore, that Suetonius, or rather his source, has misinterpreted a description of how Caligula used to boast of his descent from Augustus and Julia, by which he meant Augustus’ third and final wife Livia, in reference to a claim of descent from Augustus and his daughter Julia instead. Hence Caligula seemed to be boasting of his descent from an incestuous union. The author responsible for this error then supplied some extra detail during his transmission of the story, but detail that he assumed on the basis of his misinterpretation. Hence he claimed not only that Caligula had boasted of his descent from Augustus and Julia, but that he had specifically boasted that his mother Agrippina had been born as a result of the union of Augustus and Julia, where it was he the author who supplied the name Agrippina rather than his source.

This leaves the question as to why it should have been noteworthy that Caligula was boasting of his descent from Augustus and Julia (= Livia), why it should have been possible for him to claim to descend from Augustus and Julia (= Livia) when it was (and is) generally agreed that he was actually descended from Augustus and his second wife Scribonia by Julia, their daughter, the mother, by

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14) S. E. Wood, *Imperial Women: A Study in Public Images 40 BC – AD 68*, Leiden 2001, 36.

15) Dio 56,46,1. See A. A. Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, New Haven 2002, 148–58.

16) Barrett, *Livia* (above, n. 15) 307–08: “it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between her [Livia] and Julia, daughter or granddaughter of Augustus, Julia daughter of Titus, and Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus”.

Marcus Agrippa, of his mother Agrippina. The answer to this lies in the peculiar circumstances of the birth of Livia's second son Drusus in 38 BC. Octavian (as he then was) and Livia were betrothed in September or October 39 BC, shortly after each had divorced his or her earlier spouse. However, Livia was about 6 months pregnant with Drusus at the time, so the couple did not marry until 17 January 38 BC, as soon as possible after the birth of Drusus on 14 January apparently. As Suetonius specifically records, such circumstances encouraged a rumour that Octavian had really fathered Drusus upon Livia as a result of adultery during her previous marriage to Tiberius Nero.<sup>17</sup> I suggest, therefore, that Caligula had followed popular rumour and argued that Octavian was the real father of Drusus, making him the grandfather of Caligula's own father Germanicus.<sup>18</sup> Hence Caligula had really boasted not that Augustus had fathered Agrippina upon his daughter Julia, but that he had fathered Drusus upon his wife Julia (= Livia). This meant that Caligula could claim to be descended from Augustus on both his maternal and his paternal sides, and that his claim to rule was strengthened accordingly. More importantly, this did not involve any behaviour that the Romans would have regarded as incestuous. Hence Caligula's claim did not entail some new and shocking allegation about Augustus' behaviour. It merely entailed new official support for a story which many had long believed anyway.

In conclusion, Suetonius' claim that Caligula had used to boast that his mother Agrippina was the result of incest between Augustus and his daughter Julia preserves a misinterpretation of his boast that he was descended from Augustus and Julia, by which he meant Julia Augusta, as Livia was known after AD 14. Caligula did not mention Agrippina, or anyone else in this regard, because he assumed that his reference to his preferred account of the parentage of his grandfather Drusus would be understood by all. It was not. At some unknown date later, a hostile author misinterpreted the name of Julia Augusta in reference to Julia, Augustus' daughter, and so misidentified the product of Augustus' union with her as Agrippina rather than Drusus. Furthermore, whereas Caligula had probably conceded that this union was dishonourable in some way (*stuprum*), this author seems to have misinterpreted this term to refer in more specific fashion to an act of incest (*incestum*). Hence Suetonius' strange claim.

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17) Suet. Claud. 1,1; Dio 48,44,5. In general, see Barrett, Livia (above, n. 15) 20–27. As Barrett argues, a proper understanding of the chronology proves that Octavian cannot have been the father of Drusus.

18) If Suetonius' claim (Calig. 25,1) that Caligula had directly compared his snatching of his second wife Livia Orestilla from her husband Gaius Piso to Octavian's alleged snatching of Livia from Tiberius Nero has any historical basis to it, then his interest in this topic may suggest that he had performed some research into the circumstances surrounding the marriage of Octavian and Livia in furtherance of his claim to be descended from this marriage.