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CALIGULA, PTOLEMY OF MAURETANIA, AND THE DANGER OF LONG HAIR

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The purpose of this note is to offer a new interpretation of the passage where Suetonius claims that Caligula had king Ptolemy of Mauretania executed simply because the splendour of his cloak (*abolla*) had attracted popular attention during the games one day (*Calig*. 35,1–2):

> *Vetera familiarum insignia nobilissimo cuique ademit, Torquato torquem, Cincinnato crinem, Cn. Pompeio stirpis antiquae Magni cognomen. Ptolemaeum, de quo re<t>tuli, et arcessitum e regno et exceptum honorifice, non alia de causa repente percussit, quam quod edente se munus ingressum spectacula convertisse hominum oculos fulgore purpureae abollae animadvertit. Pulchros et comatos, quotiens sibi occurrerent, occipitio raso deturpabat*.[1]

While the testimony of Dio (59,25,1) allows us to date this execution to AD40, it throws no light on the substance of Suetonius' allegation since it merely asserts that Caligula had Ptolemy executed because he was rich.[2] Hence most scholars have traditionally dismissed this tale as a typically fanciful product of the hostile source used by Suetonius for much of his material on the Julio-Claudians, and have sought to explain Ptolemy's death in political terms instead. In particular, it has been argued that he was suspected of involvement in the alleged plot by Cornelius Lentulus Gaetulicus, governor of Upper Germany, in late AD39 apparently, and executed accordingly.[3] In contrast, Malloch has recently attempted to argue

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[1] Ed. M. Ihm, *C. Suetonius Tranquillus*: *Opera* I, Leipzig 1933, 174. All text cited from this edition.

[2] On Ptolemy, see *PIR*^{2} P 1075. He had been the sole king of Mauretania since c.AD23/24. On his family background, see now D.W. Roller, *The World of Juba II and Kleopatra Selene: Royal Scholarship on Rome's African Frontier*, London 2003.

[3] See e.g. D. Fishwick, "The Annexation of Mauretania", *Historia* 20 (1971) 467–87; D.

that this passage should be accepted pretty much at face value.[4] He concludes that Ptolemy used his cloak to flaunt his inherited and personal military glory, and that Caligula had him executed because he felt insulted and threatened. Unfortunately, his arguments do not bear close scrutiny.

His first argument is that Ptolemy used his cloak to remind everyone of his military success against Tacfarinas in North Africa, as a result of which the Senate had awarded him the trappings of a triumphator in AD24 (Tac. *Ann*. 4,26), but he avoids committing himself as to how exactly the cloak reminded people of this success. Tacitus notes only that the Senate awarded Ptolemy an ivory scepter and an embroidered toga, and does not mention a cloak of any type, so that Malloch stops short of claiming that Caligula had Ptolemy executed for wearing the very cloak which the Senate had awarded him back in AD24. Instead, he seeks to identify Ptolemy's cloak as a *paludamentum* or a type of garment strongly reminiscent of a *paludamentum*, a garment which reminded people of Ptolemy's receipt of the awards in AD24, but had not necessarily formed part of the awards itself. So why did Suetonius not use this exact term *paludamentum* instead of the vaguer and less common *abolla* which did not necessarily have any military connotations at all ? Malloch argues that Suetonius has deliberately altered the original term so as to obscure its military symbolism and to make it seem that Caligula punished Ptolemy simply for the way that he dressed.

Fishwick and B.D. Shaw, "Ptolemy of Mauretania and the Conspiracy of Gaetulicus", *Historia* 25 (1976) 491–94; A.A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of* Power, London 1989, 117–18. Alternatively, it has been argued that he may have been plotting to shake off his status as a client king. See e.g. J.C. Faur, "Caligula et Maurétanie: La Fin de Ptolémée", *Klio* 55 (1973) 249–71. There is some controversy also surrounding the location of Ptolemy at his arrest and execution, whether at Lyons or in Rome. In general, see D.W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' Life of C. Caligula* (APA American Classical Studies 32), Atlanta 1993, 134–35; also D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: A Commentary* (Collection Latomus 225), Brussels 1994, 271–72. A. Ferrill, *Caligula Emperor of Rome*, London 1991, 151, accepts the story entirely at face value, maintaining that 'there is no need to 'make sense' of this story; it is merely another of many examples of the Emperor's insane jealousy and greed'. Such an approach simply ignores the historiographical complexity of the text.

[4] S.J.V. Malloch, "The Death of Ptolemy of Mauretania", *Historia* 53 (2004), 38–45. M. Hofmann, *RE* 23,2 (1959), 1780–82, s.v. "Ptolemaios von Mauretanien", also accepted the passage at face value, but he suggested that Ptolemy was wearing the robes of a high-priest of Isis. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that Ptolemy was a high-priest of Isis, but even if he was, there is nothing to suggest that the spectacle at which he appeared had any connection with Isis.

But this does not really answer the question. Why choose to use the term *abolla* in particular instead of any other potential replacement – *amictus*, *chlamys*, *laena*, *lacerna*, *paenula*, *pallium*, *sagum*, *tegimen* ?[5] Indeed, there is an important hidden assumption here, that the ultimate literary source for this story had been written in Latin rather than Greek.

His second argument relies on the context. He compares Caligula's targeting of Ptolemy to his attacks upon other distinguished persons because of their inherited military glory as described by Suetonius in the preceding line. The problem here is that the events are not really comparable. Caligula only removed their *cognomina* from a certain Torquatus, Cincinnatus, and Pompeius Magnus, whereas he actually killed Ptolemy and not because of any name which he bore but because of an item of clothing, or so it seems. Furthermore, the *cognomina* of Torquatus, Cincinnatus and Magnus clearly evoked the military glory of a famous ancestor[6], whereas even if Ptolemy's cloak were identifiable as a *paludamentum*, it would not necessarily have symbolized anything other than his personal military pretensions. Indeed, one must question whether any of Ptolemy's contemporaries would necessarily have accepted that his ancestors had achieved any military glory at all. True, his mother was the daughter of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, but history knew them primarily as the losers of the last civil war which had culminated in their defeat at the battle of Actium in 31BC. As for his father, he was the latest member of a useful but minor royal house, most famous for their losses once more. His grandfather Juba I had committed suicide following his defeat at the battle of Thapsus in 46BC (App. *B*. *Civ*. 2,100), and the young Juba II had been led in triumph through Rome by Julius Caesar (App. *B*. *Civ*. 2,101). His subsequent return as king of Numidia, then Mauretania, was due entirely to the charity of Augustus (Dio 53,26,2). So there was no real military glory behind Ptolemy, nothing to cause the great-grandson of Augustus himself to feel any envy whatsoever.

Finally, would Ptolemy really have been so stupid as to risk upstaging the emperor himself in any possible way, least of all an emperor whose

[5] Suetonius uses the following terms for 'cloak': *chlamys* (*Tib*. 6,3; *Calig*. 19,2 and 25,3; *Nero* 25,1), *lacerna* (*Aug*. 40,5; *Claud*. 6,2), *paenula* (*Calig*. 52; *Nero* 48,1; *Nero* 49,4; *Galba* 6,2), *paludamentum* (*Iul*. 64; *Aug*. 10,4; *Claud*. 21,6; *Galba* 11; *Vit*. 11,1), *palla* (*Calig*. 54,2), *pallium* (*Aug*. 98,3; *Tib*. 13,1; *Claud*. 2,2; *Nero* 48,4), *sagum* (*Otho* 2,1), *sagulum* (*Aug*. 26,1; *Vit*. 11,1).

[6] See Wardle (above n. 3) 268–70.

cruelty and suspicious frame of mind had become increasingly obvious ? After all, this was an emperor who had just had his old friend and brother-in-law Lepidus executed and his two sisters Agrippina and Livilla banished to the Pontian islands (Dio 59,22,6–8), apart from his numerous other executions and acts of cruelty. As a distant cousin, Ptolemy had no reason at all to feel confident about his position. Hence if he did offend Caligula in some way, it has to have been an accidental insult, as a result of a chance event that he could not reasonably have anticipated.

As Malloch himself argues, the context of the anecdote is important, but I suggest that the key to the interpretation of Suetonius' description of the death of Ptolemy lies in the succeeding rather than the preceding line, in the description of how Caligula used to order the backs of their heads shaved if he happened to meet any handsome men. This was apparently because he was extremely sensitive about his own baldness, to the extent even that he forbade anyone to look down upon him from a higher place as he passed by (*Calig*. 50,1). I suggest that Suetonius' ultimate source for the death of Ptolemy had originally described his execution for a similar reason, because Caligula was jealous of his fine head of hair, and that is why these two descriptions of Caligula's actions are situated one after the other in the way that they are. Two points are important here. First, the regular citation of Greek by Suetonius points to the ultimate origin of much of his material in a Greek source.[7] Second, it is clear that the author of this source enjoyed displaying his inventiveness in the use of the Greek language. The key passage here occurs in the life of Caligula also, where Suetonius describes Caligula's alleged preparations for a triumph as he planned his return from the Channel coast in early AD40. He apparently used a Greek term which struck Suetonius, or rather his immediate source, as unusual, and no other use of this term is known even today (*Calig*. 47):

> *Conversus hinc ad curam triumphi praeter captivos ac transfugas barbaros Galliarum quoque procerissimum quemque et, ut ipse dicebat,* ἀξιοθριάμβευτον, *ac nonnullos ex principibus legit ...*

[7] The material has been collected and discussed by G.B. Townend, "The Sources of the Greek in Suetonius", *Hermes* 88 (1960) 98–120, who argued that Suetonius used a subsidiary source which was hostile to the Caesars, adopted an unchronological presentation, was excessively interested in the scandalous, and used Greek. He identified the author of this source as Cluvius Rufus. D. Wardle, "Cluvius Rufus and Suetonius", *Hermes* 120 (1992) 466–82, defends the reputation of Cluvius Rufus as a serious annalistic historian, which leaves the identity of the author of the hostile Greek source open once more.

Yet it strains credibility to believe that Caligula should really have spoken Greek to his senior officers as he planned that most Roman of celebrations, the triumph, in that part of the empire least affected by Greek language and culture, let alone that he should have attempted to coin a new word as he did so. This word belongs to the author of the Greek source from which this anecdote is ultimately derived rather than to Caligula himself. A subsequent translator has misunderstood the attribution of a certain statement to Caligula where the substance of the words alone was important to mean that he had spoken those exact Greek words. The same problem occurs earlier when Suetonius attributes another otherwise unknown Greek term to the authorship of Caligula, although he does not provide the context for the alleged statement so that it does not strike one as quite as improbable as the previous example (*Calig*. 29,1):

> *Nihil magis in natura sua laudare se ac probare dicebat quam, ut ipsius verbo utar,* ἀδιατρεψία, *hoc est inverecundiam.*

It is my suggestion, therefore, that the same Greek author displayed a similar inventiveness in the use of another unusual term in an unusual, if not unique, sense, that he claimed that Caligula had Ptolemy executed because he was ἄβολος.

The adjective ἄβολος seems to have been used almost exclusively of horses, either of young horses that had not yet shed their foal-teeth, or of older horses that no longer shed them.[8] But there is no etymological reason why its use ought to have been confined to the shedding of teeth. I suggest, therefore, that our Greek author used it of Ptolemy in order to denote the fact that he had not yet begun to lose any hair, that is, that he had a full head of hair still, despite the fact that he was probably in his mid-forties.[9] Suetonius, or, more probably, an intermediate source, did not understand

[8] H.G. Liddell and R. Scott (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon With a Revised Supplement*, Oxford 1996, 3.

[9] Tac. *Ann*. 4,23,1 describes Ptolemy as too young for responsibility (*iuventa incurioso*) at the time of the war against Tacfarinas c.AD17–24. Coins issued by King Juba II during the 30th year of his reign (AD5) show him with a diademed young child identifiable as Ptolemy, while other coins reveal that Ptolemy was bearded by Juba's 36th year (AD11). See J. Mazard, *Corpus Nummorum Numidiae Mauretaniaeque*, Paris 1955, nos. 375 and 383.

this, but was struck by the similarity of the Greek ἄβολος to the Latin term *abolla*, and assumed that it was meant to describe the wearing of an *abolla*. Hence he translated the text to mean that Caligula had Ptolemy executed for wearing an *abolla*, and sought to clarify the reason for this action by adding a reference to the bright purple colour of this cloak.

The fact that a hostile Greek source should originally have intended us to believe that Caligula had Ptolemy executed as a result of jealousy at his hair rather than at his fine cloak does not immediately strike one as very useful in shedding any better light on this problem. Unless one subscribes to the depiction of Caligula as an almost completely mad or bad emperor, it is no more convincing that he should have killed anyone because of their hair alone than because of their cloak. Yet one possibility does suggest itself. The Latin noun *caesaries* was used to describe long or luxuriant hair, and the adjective *caesariatus* to describe someone possessed of such long or luxuriant hair.[10] The potential for dangerous puns is obvious. This suits the context for the crucial incident as preserved by Suetonius, at the games. Emboldened by their numbers and anonymity, a section of the crowd may well have hailed Ptolemy as the true 'Caesar' to the immense displeasure of the bald Caesar himself.[11] Ptolemy's reaction to this witticism would have been crucial, but may well have proved the last straw for an emperor who was already suspicious of his loyalty, already desirous perhaps of adding his kingdom to the empire.

A final point is necessary. In a section where he lists examples of Caligula's alleged brutality, Suetonius describes an occasion when he apparently selected men to be fed to some wild-animals which he had gathered for games simply by identifying them by their position in a line between two bald men, 'from baldhead to baldhead' (*Calig*. 27,1):

Cum ad saginam ferarum muneri praeparatarum carius pecudes compararentur, ex noxiis laniandos adnotavit, et custodiarum seriem recognoscens,nullius inspecto elogio, stans tantum modo intra porticum mediam, a calvo ad calvum duci imperavit.

[10] P.G.W. Glare (ed.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, Oxford 1982, 254.

[11] Caligula's relations with the general public were fraught. Suetonius claims that he sometimes used to draw back the awnings in the theatre at the hottest time of the day and forbid anyone to leave, or remove the usual equipment and substitute old fighters set against mangy wild beasts (*Calig*. 26,5). As always, Suetonius may be generalizing on the basis of one incident alone of either type. Whatever the case, such behaviour is best interpreted as an attempt to punish the crowd for some offence rather than, as has been argued, an attempt at austerity. Wardle (above n. 3) 245 suggests that Caligula may have wished 'to punish perverse audiences who often spurned good entertainment', but the offence may have been more personal.

At the very least, his use of this phrase reveals the continued sensitivity of Caligula to this subject. Nevertheless, while the expression 'from baldhead to baldhead' may have been proverbial, this does not itself suffice to explain why he should have chosen to use it on this occasion in particular.[12] On the one hand, one could choose to interpret his use of it here at face value as presented by Suetonius, that he used it simply to refer to two bald men who happened to stand at opposite ends of a line. On the other hand, this whole incident may have a much more direct bearing upon the death of Ptolemy in circumstances already outlined than may initially seem to be the case. Typically, Suetonius describes this event only in brief and without a full political or chronological context, but Dio is no more helpful (59,22,3). One wonders, therefore, whether Caligula was not really ordering the deaths of a group of men whose heads he had ordered to be shaved beforehand. His cry 'from baldhead to baldhead' may have been intended to mock their new 'baldness' rather than to identify some fraction of their number to be fed to the beasts. The joke, if we may call it that, is that he wanted them all to be fed to the beasts. He did not have to read the charge made against each individually because they had all been arrested at the same time for the same offence. It is possible, therefore, that these men may have been arrested because they had been identified as members of the crowd who had mockingly identified Ptolemy as the true 'Caesar', and that they had had their heads shaved before their final execution in order to humiliate them in the same way that they had humiliated the emperor. If this possibility is allowed, then the real mistake made by Ptolemy may have been in trying to intervene on their behalf with the emperor. That would have made it seem as if he was deliberately trying to curry the favour of the mob, and in a context where a section of this mob had already hailed him as 'Caesar', even in jest, this would have been fatal.

In conclusion, it is arguable that the anecdote concerning the death of Ptolemy of Mauretania derives from a Greek source which had described Ptolemy as ἄβολος in reference to his full head of hair, but that a subsequent Latin translator misunderstood this term to describe the wearing of an *abolla* instead. In reality, Ptolemy was probably put to death because

[12] In general, see Hurley (above n. 3), 112; Wardle (above n. 3), 246–47.

of a witticism by the mob at the games punning upon his long hair (*caesaries*) and the office of emperor (*Caesar*), and his reaction to the same.

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