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Caligula, Asprenas, and the Bloodied Robe

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Josephus and Suetonius preserve similar lists of portents said to have occurred in the hours leading up to the assassination of the emperor Caligula while attending the *ludi palatini* at a temporary theatre erected in front of the imperial palace in January AD41.¹ They each begin this list of portents with an account of an accident that occurred while Caligula and his entourage were attending a sacrifice, before then describing the ominous nature of the entertainment itself. However, while they preserve similar accounts of the nature of this accident, describing how blood from the sacrificial victim splattered upon the clothing of one of those present, they differ both as to the identity of the man whose clothing was so stained and the significance of this accident. The purpose of this note is to explore the significance of these differences and attempt a resolution of the same.

Josephus describes the accident within a larger chronological narrative, and so provides greater context and detail, his account running as follows (*AJ* 19.87):

Γάιος δὲ προόδων αὐτῷ γενομένων ἔθυσσε τῷ Σεβαστῷ Καίσαρι, ὃ δὴ καὶ τὰ τῆς θεωρίας ἤγετο, καὶ πίπτοντος τῶν ἱερείων τινὸς συνέβη αἵματι τὴν Ἀσπρήνα στολὴν ἐνὸς τῶν συγκλητικῶν ἀνάπλεων γενέσθαι. τοῦτο Γαίῳ γέλωτα μὲν παρέσχεν, ἣν δ' ἄρα εἰς οἰωνὸν τῷ Ἀσπρήνῃ φανερόν· ἐπικατασφάζεται γὰρ τῷ Γαίῳ.

Gaius, when his procession entered, sacrificed to Augustus Caesar, in whose honour the spectacle was presented. It happened that, as one of the victims fell, the robe of Asprenas, a man of senatorial rank, was splattered with blood. At this Gaius burst out laughing, but to Asprenas it turned out to be a manifest omen, for he was struck down over Gaius' dead body.²

As Josephus notes later, Asprenas was a member of the plot against Caligula (*AJ* 19.98), although he did not participate in his actual stabbing.³ However, when the German bodyguard set off in pursuit of the assassins immediately after this, they chanced upon him first of all, and killed him because they thought that the blood upon his clothing was that of Caligula, so proving that he was one of the assassins (*AJ* 19.123).

In contrast, Suetonius' description of the accident occurs as part of a thematic passage describing a long list of alleged portents of the assassination of Caligula from as far back as the previous Ides of March up until the final hours before the assassination itself. Accordingly, it is far briefer than that of Josephus (*Calig.* 57.4):

1 It was characteristic of the historiography of the imperial period to include groups of omens signifying the death of an emperor shortly before his death. For a full list of alleged omens connected to the emperors from Augustus to Domitian, including those signifying their deaths, see Vigourt 2001, 22-74.

2 Ed. & trans. Feldman 1965, 256-257.

3 P. Nonius Asprenas was *consul posterior* in AD38. See *PIR*² N121.

*Prodigiorum loco habita sunt etiam, quae forte illo ipso die paulo prius acciderant.
Sacrificans respersus est phoenicopteri sanguine; ...*

Some things which had happened on that very day shortly before he was killed were also regarded as portents. As he was sacrificing, he was sprinkled with the blood of a flamingo, ...⁴

It is clear that Suetonius understood that Caligula had accidentally splattered himself with the blood of the sacrifice. While he does not explicitly identify the flamingo as the sacrificial victim, he does include it among the list of the choicest victims sacrificed to Caligula's *numen* earlier in the text (*Calig.* 22.3), and it is hard to see what other purpose it might have served here. No attempt is made to explain how or why the sprinkling of this bird's blood upon the clothing of Caligula portends his death, the apparent assumption being that this was obvious. In fact, Suetonius adopts the same basic interpretative approach here as does Josephus above, that the spilling of blood upon someone's clothing prefigures the spilling of their own blood upon their clothing, that is, their death. This is because – in hindsight at least – the bloodying of someone or something was typically regarded as an omen of death, normally that of the person bloodied or of the owner of the thing bloodied.⁵ However, and this is a key point, there was sometimes a certain ambiguity as to whose death was signified, whether that of the one bloodied or that of another slain by the one bloodied.⁶

If one assumes that there is a common historical basis to these accounts, and there seems no good reason not to assume this, then one immediately faces the challenge of deciding which source is correct here, Josephus in saying that it was Asprenas who was splattered with blood, or Suetonius in saying that it was Caligula who was splattered with blood.⁷

4 Ed. & trans. Rolfe 1913, 492-493. It is not clear why Suetonius should seem to distance himself from accepting the divinatory reality of the alleged omens occurring in the final hours before the assassination, as revealed by his impersonal introduction to this list of incidents, but does not seem to have similar doubts concerning earlier alleged omens. It may partly have to do with the nature of the authority which first identified the various events as omens, or offered them as such, so that, for example, he could accept the authority of the *mathematicus* Sulla and the oracle at Antium to offer true omens (*Calig.* 57.2-3), but would not necessarily accept the identification of other events as omens just because popular rumour described them in this way.

5 E.g. the consul Pansa received a palm splattered with blood before he was killed in battle in 43BC (Dio 46.33.2; Obsequens 69); Galba was soaked with blood by a wounded sacrificial bull as he made his way to Rome in AD68 where he was killed subsequently (Suet. *Galba* 18.1).

6 E.g. when the shields of Sertorius' cavalry, their javelins, and the breasts of their horses seemed to be stained with blood in 75BC, he re-interpreted this as a good omen, that they would soon be stained with the blood of their enemies (Obsequens 60). Similarly, when Caecina dreamed of a bloodied Varus shortly before he marched out against Arminius and Cherusci once more (Tac. *Ann.* 1.65.2), the significance of the blood was only proven in hindsight by his defeat of the Germans, so proving that it had been German blood. Again, when Germanicus dreamed before the battle of Idistaviso in AD16 that he had stained his clothing while offering sacrifice, but that his grandmother gave him an even finer garment (Tac. *Ann.* 2.14.1), that was also a good omen, because it represented political elevation after a bloody defeat of the Germans.

7 Hurley 1993, 205 claims that 'the garment bloodied during sacrifice was a stock omen of imminent death, and so it is probable that neither Gaius nor Asprenas was bloodied by a

Unfortunately, most modern commentators have avoided any discussion of this issue.⁸ One could, of course, attempt to resolve this problem by arguing that both sources are correct, but that each preserves only a partial description of what happened, that is, that both Asprenas and Caligula were stained with blood. However, apart from any other considerations, Josephus' claim that Caligula burst out laughing when Asprenas was splattered suggests that he himself was left untouched.⁹ He was happy to laugh at the discomfort of Asprenas, but one may doubt whether his reaction would have been the same had he also been splattered.

In order to resolve this issue, one must turn from the details of Josephus' and Suetonius' descriptions of this sacrifice to a more general consideration of the reliability of these sections of their texts, particularly the reliability of their descriptions of the ominous nature of two of the plays offered shortly after the sacrifice. Josephus describes these plays as follows (*AJ* 19.94):

ἐνθα δὲ καὶ σημεῖα συμβαίνει δύο γενέσθαι· καὶ γὰρ μῦθος εἰσάγεται, καθ' ὃν σταυροῦται ληφθεὶς ἡγεμὼν, ὃς τε ὀρχηστῆς δρᾶμα εἰσάγει Κινύραν, ἐν ᾧ αὐτὸς τε ἐκτείνεται καὶ ἡ θυγάτηρ Μύρρα, αἷμά τε ἦν τεχνητὸν πολλὸν καὶ τὸ περὶ τὸν σταυρωθέντα ἐκκεχυμένον καὶ τὸ περὶ τὸν Κινύραν. ὁμολογεῖται δὲ καὶ τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην γενέσθαι, ἐν ᾗ Φίλιππον τὸν Ἀμύντου Μακεδόνων βασιλέα κτείνει Πausanίας εἰς τῶν ἐταίρων εἰς τὸ θέατρον εἰσιόντα.

Here there were two new portents. In the first place a mime was presented in the course of which a chieftain is caught and crucified. Moreover, the play presented by the dancer was *Cinyras*, in which the hero and his daughter Myrrha are killed. Thus a great quantity of artificial blood was shed, what with the crucified man and *Cinyras*. It is also agreed that the day of the year was the same as that on which Philip, the son of Amyntas and king of the Macedonians, was slain by Pausanias, one of his 'Companions', as he entered the theatre.¹⁰

Suetonius describes the same two plays, in reverse order, in his list of portents immediately after his description of the sacrificial accident:

... ; *et pantomimus Mnester tragoediam saltavit, quam olim Neoptolemus tragoedus ludis, quibus rex Macedonum Philippus occisus est, egerat; et cum in Laureolo mimo, in quo*

flamingo or anything else'. Barrett 2015, 268, n. 66, seems to support this approach in so far as he claims that the omen is 'to be viewed with suspicion'. However, even if the garment bloodied during sacrifice was a stock omen, this was precisely because it was a plausible event, the sort of thing that could and did sometimes occur. Furthermore, it does not solve the historiographical problem to claim that such stories were literary inventions, because one then has to decide which account better preserves the original fiction in this case, unless one is to assume that two authors independently invented almost identical omens, which is simply not credible.

⁸ Balsdon 1934, 103 prefers Josephus' account, specifically rejecting that of Suetonius, but without any explanation; Wardle 1994, 360 and Galimberti 2001, 181 note the different accounts without any further comment; Vigourt 2001, 50, 151 prefers that of Suetonius without even acknowledging the existence of Josephus' account.

⁹ For another example of his inappropriate sense of humour at a sacrifice, see Suet. *Calig.* 32.3. On that incident, when Caligula apparently slew the priest rather than the sacrifice, see Power 2015.

¹⁰ Ed. & trans. Feldman 1965, 258-261.

actor proripiens se ruina sanguinem vomit, plures secundarum certatim experimentum artis darent, cruore scaena abundavit.

... and the pantomimic actor Mnester danced a tragedy which the tragedian Neoptolemus had acted years before during the games at which Philip king of the Macedonians was assassinated. In a farce called *Laureolus*, in which the chief actor falls as he is making his escape and vomits blood, several understudies so vied with one another in giving evidence of their proficiency that the stage swam in blood.¹¹

Their combined evidence reveals the titles of the two ominous plays, *Laureolus* and *Cinyras*, named after the leading character in each. The key point here is that Josephus claims that *Laureolus* was crucified, and other sources prove that the historical *Laureolus*, a brigand, had indeed been crucified.¹² Hence when Suetonius describes his death as the result of a fall resulting in severe internal bleeding, it is clear that he has attributed the wrong form of death to him. On the other hand, *Cinyras* was reputed to have committed suicide, and one obvious and easy method of suicide was to throw oneself from a great height.¹³ Consequently, it has been argued that, for whatever reason, Suetonius has wrongly attributed the death of *Cinyras* to *Laureolus* instead.¹⁴

The fact that Suetonius attributes the wrong form of death to *Laureolus*, probably that suffered by *Cinyras* instead, encourages the conclusion that in the conflict between him and Josephus concerning the identity of the person splattered with blood at the sacrifice, he is likely wrong there also. However, this does not entirely resolve the issue. One may assume that one factor encouraging Suetonius, or his source, to identify the person splattered with blood as Caligula rather than *Asprenas* was that the ultimate source had introduced this incident as a portent of the death of Caligula, and this is exactly what one would have expected to find in any narrative account of the events leading to the death of a senior figure, that the emphasis would be on portents pointing to his death rather than that of any of his companions. To that extent, Josephus' description of the accident as a portent pointing to the death of *Asprenas* rather than of Caligula seems somewhat anomalous occurring when and where it does.

The answer to the problem posed by the occurrence of an omen pointing the death of *Asprenas* where one might more naturally have expected an omen pointing to that of Caligula instead may be related to the intrinsic ambiguity of omens, and the delight that ancient authors often took in describing the initial misinterpretation of an omen by the relevant figure before he eventually realises, all too late, that he has got it wrong.¹⁵ In this context, the fact that Caligula is specifically described as laughing at the fact that *Asprenas* had been splattered with blood suggests that he had originally been portrayed as yet another senior

11 Ed. & trans. Rolfe 1913, 492-493.

12 Juvenal 8.187-188; Martial, *De Spectac.* 9(7).4.

13 Hyginus, *Fabulae* 242.

14 Herrmann 1985, 228.

15 Senior figures who misinterpret omens of doom in their favour range from King Croesus of Lydia in the 6th century BC (Hdt. 1.53, 86) to the emperor Constantius II in the 4th century AD (Amm.21.6.2-3). Exceptionally, Vespasian is depicted as deliberately misinterpreting the omens pointing to his death in accordance with his dark humour rather than fatal ignorance (Suet. *Vesp.* 23.4). It is noteworthy that Suetonius also describes how Caligula had misinterpreted a warning by the lots of Fortune at Antium to beware of Cassius in reference to a Cassius Longinus, proconsul of Asia, rather than to Cassius Chaerea, the lead assassin striking the first blow (*Calig.* 57.3).

figure who had misinterpreted an omen pointing to his death, because he had laughed at an event at which he would not really have done so had he truly understood its significance. So how else might the splattering of Asprenas with blood have been understood? Yes, the slaughter of the victim resulted in his robe being bloodied in such a way as to suggest his death, but perhaps one should look to the identity of the victim also, and who or what it prefigures. A key point here is that one of the two traditions preserved by Suetonius concerning the killing of Caligula reports that Cassius Chaerea shouted *Hoc age* 'Mark this = Pay attention', the traditional command of an official presiding at a sacrifice, as he struck Caligula, and that he struck him on the neck, where the sacrificial victim was normally struck also.¹⁶ Hence this tradition implicitly compares Caligula to a sacrificial victim in what may have been intended as an indication of the true ominous significance at the accident at the sacrifice earlier. Furthermore, one of the portents of Caligula's death reported by Suetonius, the arrival of an otherwise unspecified Cassius at the statue of Jupiter at Olympia claiming that he had been ordered in a dream to offer a bull in sacrifice to Jupiter, was clearly intended to prefigure Cassius' assassination of Caligula, so casting the latter as a sacrificial bull (*Calig.* 57.1). Accordingly, it is evident that it would have been entirely natural to interpret the death of Caligula as a type of sacrifice.

It is my argument, therefore, that the original description of the accident at the sacrifice may have been intended as a sort of double omen pointing to a killing that would also result in the death of Asprenas, that is, to the killing of Caligula as well as of Asprenas. Josephus has summarized the first part of the unfolding drama well, Caligula's misinterpretation of the omen that actually pointed to his own death in addition to that of Asprenas, but he has not included a summary of the final revelation of the full and true significance of this omen in his text also. The result is that his summary of his Roman source does not allow a proper understanding of the ominous significance of the accident at the sacrifice.

In conclusion, it is arguable that the ultimate source of the descriptions by Josephus and Suetonius of the portents occurring immediately before the death of Caligula had originally described how Caligula had misinterpreted the significance of the splattering of sacrificial blood upon Asprenas in conformity with the normal interpretation of such an occurrence, that it pointed to the death of the one whose clothing was bloodied.¹⁷ However, the author of this account had probably signalled to the reader that it was also an omen pointing to the death of Caligula himself, and had explained this in more detail at the appropriate point later in his narrative, where he characterized the killing of Caligula as a form of sacrifice. Josephus summarised the narrative in such a way as to present Caligula's misinterpretation of the omen as the main or only interpretation, while Suetonius, or his immediate source, expected the omen to be about Caligula and, so accidentally or otherwise, identified him rather than Asprenas as the person splattered with blood. Ironically, therefore, Suetonius, or his source, misinterpreted the omen in the same way as Caligula himself allegedly did in the assumption

16 Suet. *Calig.* 58.2. On *Hoc age* used in sacrificial contexts, see e.g. Plut. *Num.* 14.2, *Coriol.* 25.2. See Hurley 2014, 148-50.

17 It does not seem useful to speculate as to the identity of this source. It is generally agreed that Josephus used at least two main Roman sources in his account of the death of Caligula and the succession of Claudius, one of whom is often identified as Cluvius Rufus. See e.g. Goud 1996 in support of 'one senatorial source and the other pro-Claudian'; Scherberich 2001 identifying several sources, including a historical monograph on Cassius Chaerea; Wiseman 2013, xiv-xvi, in favour of Cluvius Rufus and another source. Suetonius probably included Cluvius Rufus among his multiple sources for the life of Caligula also, but it is impossible to prove this in any particular case. See Wardle 1994, 30-54.

that it was a simple omen pointing to the death only of the one whose robe was splashed by blood, whereas it also pointed to the death of him prefigured by the sacrificial victim itself.

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