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Dyslexia Augusti: Does Suetonius describe a pattern of signs consistent with dyslexia?

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Abstract

It is generally agreed that Morgan was the first to reliably describe dyslexia with the case of Percy F. However, Suetonius, in "The lives of the twelve Caesars" describes the Emperor Augustus as having a range of language and literacy difficulties that could be consistent with this diagnosis. Using the framework of cognitive psychology, which rarely comments on the historical record, this article argues that Suetonius describes both signs and compensating strategies typical of an adult with remediated developmental dyslexia. If accepted, this analysis would locate a possible coherent description of the condition back to the second century CE.

KEYWORDS: dyslexia, literacy, memory, reading, writing

INTRODUCTION

Retrospective diagnosis is an intellectual exercise in which historical figures are subjected to medical and psychological appraisal (Aaron, Phillips, & Larsen, 1988; Hyland, Boduszek, & Kielkiewicz, 2011; James, 2003; Raitiere, 2011). The compelling aspect of the enterprise is in large part due to the satisfaction of identifying patterns of behaviour that are consistent with current nosological systems that were unknown at the time. Occasionally, these studies may have an explanatory power to throw light on historically important decisions (Ambrosius, 1987), whereas others may highlight an implicit understanding of the disorder before its establishment by modern scientific methods (King, 2013).

However, retrospective diagnosis comes with clear caveats (Karenberg, 2009). These predominantly relate to the difficulty of relying upon reports that were not prepared with the modern, or indeed, any diagnostic system in mind (Aaron et al., 1988; Adelman & Adelman, 1987; Hughes, 2013; Karenberg, 2009). Nevertheless, it is the consistency with which such reports support the putative diagnosis that is so intellectually rewarding.

In this paper, we examine Suetonius's (trans, 1914) biography of the Emperor Augustus, one of the founding architects of imperial Rome (Eck, 2003; Bleicken, 2016). Seutonius (Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus) was born in Rome 84 years after Augustus death in 98 AD. He was well regarded as a historian and was described by Pliny as “quiet and studious, a man dedicated to writing.” On the basis of this reputation, he became the director of Imperial archives under Emperor Trajan and then secretary to the Emperor Hadrian. His famous history of the Twelve Caesars is often criticised as being rather informal, but it is quite clear that he was able to work from original sources in the Imperial archive and he had direct access to the personal letters and documents written by Augustus.

In particular, we consider a series of signs, which form a pattern consistent with a hypothesis that Augustus as an adult may have had developmental dyslexia which was to an extent compensated. This analysis is offered in the spirit of a speculative appraisal of the behavioural signs, as reflected through the lens of an imperial Roman context.

Augustus was born Gaius Octavius in 63 BCE. He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar who later adopted him as his son and heir. In 31 BCE, following a tempestuous period of civil war Octavian became the first Roman Emperor and was named Augustus by the Roman Senate to reflect the respect and honour he enjoyed. During his 45 years as Emperor, he developed the new Roman constitution that laid the foundation for the Pax Romana. This created an unprecedented two centuries of relative peace and stability. The constitutional reforms he made survived throughout the Roman period and heavily influenced the development of modern Europe.

Morgan (1896) presents us, with what is regarded, as the earliest reliable case study description of dyslexia. Percy F, he says, was “a bright and intelligent boy” who was unable to learn how to read, even though he had received “laborious and persistent training.” Morgan regarded his difficulties as “remarkable.” While this is widely cited as the first coherent description of Dyslexia (Petretto & Masala, 2017), there are still disagreements about an exact definition (Grunke & Cavendish, 2016; Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003; Williams, Miciak, McFarland, & Wexler, 2016). Tunmer and Greaney (2010) argue that researchers have three concerns in this area: what is dyslexia, how does it originate, and can it be remediated, with an emphasis on the latter. Following this logic, we will be guided by the research literature as we attempt to interpret Suetonius's account of Augustus's literary difficulties.

Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2005) maintain that reading rate and spelling difficulty may be the most useful indicators that differentiate a young adult with dyslexia from a poor reader. Therefore, we would expect difficulties in decoding written words (Vellutino & Fletcher, 2005). It is this aspect that first drew our attention to Suetonius's account, as he identified as remarkable Augustus' difficulty with spelling:

> *He does not strictly comply with orthography. (II, LXXXVIII)*

In itself, this is not strong evidence of dyslexia. It could be that Augustus was a poor reader or that he lacked sufficient education. Both of these explanations are easy to dismiss. It is clear that Augustus was an intelligent man and that he achieved a level of education such that the presence of a reading difficulty for this reason would have been surprising (Everitt, 2006).

The political leadership of Augustus was prodigious (Bleicken, 2016; Everitt, 2006). He successfully transitioned the Roman Republic into the Empire and established a form of government that endured in the west until 476 CE, and in the east until 1453 CE. He was also the author of a number of literary works, most notably Res Gestae Divi Augusti (The Deeds of the Divine Augustus). So this is a surprising deficiency given Augustus's undoubted level of ability and the importance given to education and literary culture for members of the imperial elite (Morley, 2010, p. 125). It would certainly appear that Augustus did not neglect his education:

> *I have noticed that although this quote is enclosed by quotation marks, the other quotations are not. I wonder for consistency sake should they be omitted here?"From early youth he devoted himself eagerly and with the utmost diligence to oratory and liberal studies." (II, LXXXIV)*

Consequently, a lack of educational opportunity is unlikely to provide an adequate explanation of his non-standard orthography. Of course, it is necessary to consider the possibility that Suetonius's commentary may have been motivated by a desire to blemish the memory of Augustus. Suetonius was the Emperor Hadrian's secretary for a time and "The Twelve Lives" was probably written during this period. Hadrian regarded himself as the second Augustus but superior to the first. Suetonius may have been trying to curry favour by highlighting deficiency in the former.

We can only speculate about whether a publicly known difficulty in spelling would have tarnished Augustus's reputation. In our time, spelling errors are often seen as a sign of lack of intelligence (Romani, Olson, & Di Betta, 2005), and for seekers of political office, such errors can be a source of ridicule. Dan Quayle (US Vice President, 1989–1993) was widely criticised for failing to spell "potato," when he corrected an elementary student in a spelling bee during the 1992 election campaign. The fact that Quayle (1995) felt the need to defend his position, arguing that he was relying on a cue card supplied by the school, underlies the importance given to such errors. Julius Caesar, Augustus's adopted great uncle, is conventionally thought to have suffered from epilepsy, although a re-evaluation suggests it could have been strokes (Galassi & Ashrafian, 2015). It is clear that he took pains to hide his affliction from his political foes, as knowledge of it would damage his perceived ability to lead. It is certainly possible that Augustus hid a reading difficulty for similar reasons. It is our intention below, to show that, as Seutonius' account of Augustus proceeds, this possibility looks more like a probability and that the behavioural patterns he describes are consistent with what we would today call developmental dyslexia with remediation.

We cannot prove that Augustus had dyslexia. However, we can examine Suetonius's accounts of his literary difficulties and view them through the prism of modern cognitive psychology. The types of mistakes that Augustus made, and particularly if there is a pattern, may indicate the underlying cognitive processes he used to generate words. Should they cohere into a pattern consistent with our current knowledge, this would suggest that Suetonius was likely faithfully describing Augustus's behaviour, as it would be more than unlikely that he could have described a disorder for which there was no knowledge at the time. This would lead us to falsify the claim of a political slur and lead, in the absence of any other viable alternative, to the conclusion that Suetonius was likely describing the dyslexia of Augustus, and in doing so, he may have provided us with our earliest description of developmental dyslexia.

Compensated adult dyslexics can attain expected levels of reading skill; however, spelling can be more problematic. Both difficulties arise from the same source (Romani et al., 2005). Reading can be aided by contextual and semantic cues. However, if specific words are not well represented in the lexicon, spelling errors can occur. Consequently, such errors can be the most obvious sign displayed among adult dyslexics. Moreover, the type of errors can be particular. Kemp, Parrila, and Kirby (2009) found that adult dyslexics had difficulties with simple orthographic words, where the pattern had to be memorised, and suggested that for high functioning adult dyslexics spelling errors occurred when they had not memorised the orthographic rules and there were insufficient phonological cues. And it is here that we will commence our examination with Suetonius's report that Augustus had difficulties with orthographic rules, which on the face of it could suggest spelling difficulties of a pattern consistent with high functioning dyslexia.

In doing so, we used the diagnostic criteria of Lyon et al. (2003) as a framework to evaluate the possibility of dyslexia. They define it as a specific learning disability, and that in the context of other abilities and educational input, it is unexpected. It has a neurological basis and is characterised by difficulties in word recognition, in terms of accuracy and/or fluency, spelling difficulties, and the ability to decode. Most usually, these difficulties arise from a cognitive deficit in phonological processing. The Task Force Report on Dyslexia (2001) also includes reference to working memory; "It is typically characterised by inefficient information processing, including difficulties in phonological processing, working memory, rapid naming and automaticity of basic skills. Difficulties in organisation, and motor skills may also be present." (p. 3)

Although a difficulty in spelling is the most prominent sign of dyslexia in adulthood (Nergård-Nilssen & Hulme, 2014), there are considerable issues in ascribing this alone to dyslexia. It may be problematic disentangling the impact of education and any compensation strategies that the individual may have developed. Moreover, often, it is difficult to distinguish signs due to dyslexia from those due to noncognitive causes (Singleton, Horne, & Simmons, 2009). In addition, the way in which dyslexia is manifested is dependent on the environment, specifically in this case, the nature of Latin of the time. These difficulties are compounded by the challenge of examining a third hand historical record composed up to 150 years after the death of Augustus. Nevertheless, using current diagnostic criteria (Lyon et al., 2003), some progress may be possible.

It is widely acknowledged that Augustus was well educated (Bleicken, 2016; Eck, 2003; Everitt, 2006). Suetonius reports that

> *from early youth he devoted himself to eagerly and with utmost diligence to oratory and liberal studies. (II, LXXXIV)*

As Augustus was well educated for the time, his spelling difficulty is unexpected and fulfils one of the diagnostic criteria (Lyon et al., 2003). However, we are still left with the question of whether these difficulties were cognitive in origin. For this, we need to examine the nature of the errors to determine whether they could point to cognitive processes. Andreou and Baseki (2012) distinguish between phonological type errors, difficulties with the sound sequences, and orthographic errors—violations of spelling rules. Adult dyslexic readers make more of both types of errors compared to fully functional readers. The proportion of these types of errors is dependent on orthographic depth of the language (Lukatela, Carello, Shankweiler, & Liberman, 1995), and given that we can only speculate on the orthographic depth of the Latin of the time, all we can say with certainty is that these types of errors could be present. Andrea and Baseki also identify scaffolding errors, that is, errors where both the initial and final phonemes are preserved, with errors in the central part of the word. Here, dyslexic readers have developed skills to phonologically process the beginnings and endings of words; however, the central part of the word is processed as an incomplete image. This incomplete phonological processing results in errors (Gupta, 2004). Consequently, the nature of Augustus's spelling mistakes would be an interaction between several unknowables: the nature of Latin and whether it was phonically shallow or not, the type of reading instruction that he had received, and any cognitive difficulties he may have had in processing phonological material. Examining his errors could give us some clues. Seutonius reports some of the mistakes he made:

> *… seeming to be rather of the mind of those who believe that we should spell exactly as we pronounce. (II, LXXXVIII)*

This could suggest that the Latin of the time was not phonically regular. This is in contrast to Modern Latin, which is regarded as a phonetically shallow language. In this situation, what Augustus could have being doing is making modifications to the language for himself so that it becomes more phonetically regular, and so consequently, he can spell in a consistent, albeit nonconventional way. Suetonius states:

> *Of course his frequent transposition or omission of syllables as well as of letters are slips common to all mankind. I should not have noted this, did it not seem to me surprising that some have written that he cashiered a consular governor, as an uncultivated and ignorant fellow, because he observed that he hadwritten ixi for ipsi. (II,LXXXVIII)*

This latter is an interesting observation, in that Suetonius is reflecting on his own motivation for highlighting Augustus's spelling errors, that is, the inconsistency of the Emperor chiding another for making the type of errors he himself was making. This commentary could strengthen the case that Suetonius was faithful in his reports. He gives us more clues as to Augustus's difficulties.

> *He continually used baceolus (dolt) for stultus (fool), for pullus (dark) pulleiaceus (darkish), and for cerritus (mad) vacer-rosus (blockhead); also vapide se habere (feel flat) for male se habere (feel badly), and betizare (be like a beet) for languere (be weak), for which the vulgar term is lachanizare. Besides he used simus for sumus and domos in the genitive singular instead of domuos. The last two forms he wrote invariably, for fear they should be thought errors rather than a habit. (II,LXXXVII)*

These errors are difficult to account for; dolt (baceolus) for fool (stultus) could suggest semantic errors, as could mad (cerritus) and blockhead (vacerrosus); this might suggest evidence of deep dyslexia (Coltheart, Patterson, & Marshall, 1987). However, they could also represent stylistic word choices. Nevertheless, the more significant are the last two, as they are consistent with scaffolding errors where the initial and final consonants are preserved. These type of errors are common among adult dyslexic readers (Andreou & Baseki, 2012). What this prompts is an examination of Suetonius's account as he describes Augustus's literary and cultural life to determine whether there were other peculiarities, which if taken as a whole, forms a pattern that is consistent with our current understanding of dyslexia.

Before any clear determination may be made, it is necessary to rule out any suggestion of acquired dyslexia. It is always possible that Augustus could have acquired this impairment in adulthood, the most plausible explanation being that he may have suffered a neurological insult. Although Augustus did engage in battle, no account of a head injury has come down to us (Bleicken, 2016; Everitt, 2006). That is not to say that one did not occur. Although we cannot exclude this possibility, a more fruitful avenue might be to speculate that Augustus's difficulties were developmental in origin. If this were so, we would expect Augustus to have had difficulties in acquiring reading proficiency. It is not possible for us to determine this from the historical record, as we do know that he could read.

Suetonius tells us:

> *He even read entire volumes to the senate and called the attention of the people to them by proclamations. (II, LXXXIX)… He also wrote "Exhortations to Philosophy" and some volumes of an Autobiography, giving an account of his life in thirteen books up to the time of the Cantabrian war, but no farther, … (II, LXXXV).*

Notwithstanding this, if Augustus's spelling errors were due to difficulties in processing phonological information, signs of this may still have been evident in the wider area of language and literacy. It is to this we now turn our attention.

Augustus's great uncle, Julius Caesar, was bilingual, and he sent the then Octavian to Greece to finish his education, rather than allow him to join the army, as the young man had demanded. Caesar knew that for Augustus to progress in life he would have to speak Greek and Latin. Bilingual studies were a cornerstone of the system of education of those being prepared for membership of the elite (Bloomer, 1997). Augustus devoted time to this aim.

> *He was equally interested in Greek studies, and in these too he excelled greatly. His teacher of declamation was Apollodorus of Pergamon, whom he even took with him in his youthful days from Rome to Apollonia, though Apollodorus was an old man at the time. (II, LXXXIX)*

Notwithstanding this effort, he did not fully succeed in his Greek studies.

> *Yet he never acquired the ability to speak Greek fluently or to compose anything in it; for if he had occasion to use the language, he wrote what he had to say in Latin and gave it to someone else to translate. (II, LXXXIX)*

There are many reasons why acquiring a second language would be difficult. However, such difficulties are not uncommon in those with dyslexia. Nevertheless, the emperor did want to appear fluent in Greek.

> *In reading the writers of both tongues there was nothing for which he looked so carefully as precepts and examples instructive to the public or to individuals; these he would often copy word for word, and send to the members of his household, or to his generals and provincial governors, whenever any of them required admonition. (II, LXXXIX)*

The main difficulty that dyslexia poses for second language acquisition is as a result of a weakness in the phonological processing system (Lundberg, 2002). This sign adds weight to the argument that Suetonius was inadvertently describing a pattern in Augustus that would be consistent with our modern understanding of dyslexia.

In addition to difficulties with Greek as a second language, Augustus may have had difficulties with the oral aspects of Latin. Suetonius tells us that:

> *He had an agreeable and rather characteristic enunciation, and he practised constantly with a teacher of elocution; but sometimes because of weakness of the throat he addressed the people through a herald. (II, LXXXIV)*

Taken by itself, like his difficulties with acquiring Greek, this statement is open to multiple interpretations. However, in the context of supposed phonological difficulties, it would be consistent with the presence of dyslexia. Children and adults with dyslexia have difficulties in perceiving the pattern (Goswami, Huss, Mead, Fosker, & Verney, 2013), and structure (Goswami, Gerson, & Astruc, 2010) of speech. It would be interesting to speculate whether his enunciation is related to difficulties in phonological processing and whether we are seeing described an early account of speech therapy. Certainly, it could indicate the presence of difficulties in processing auditory information We may be on firmer ground with verbal memory issues that Suetonius seems to describe:

Suetonius describes some continuing difficulties he had with verbal memory. He says,

> *Moreover, to avoid the danger of forgetting what he was to say, or wasting time in committing it to memory, he adopted the practice of reading everything from a manuscript. (II, LXXXIV)*

Oratory was an important Roman skill. Unlike politicians nowadays who rely on autocues etc., Roman politicians spoke from memory, using mnemonic devices such as the method of Loci to help them learn their speeches (Moè & De Beni, 2005). Augustus would only have abandoned the practice of delivering speeches from memory for a very good reason, and such a decision would be consistent with the verbal short-term memory difficultiesassociated with dyslexia (Trecy, Steve, & Martine, 2013). This difficulty is also evident with his conversations. Suetonius tells us that

> *Even his conversations with individuals and the more important of those with his own wife Livia, he always wrote out and read from a note-book, for fear of saying too much or too little if he spoke offhand. (II, LXXXIV)*

These two passages are interesting in that they describe an apparent weakness that Augustus had with spoken language, namely verbal memory, and also describe a strategy that he uses to overcome this difficulty. He lessens the burden on his memory by writing things down. It is to compensation, alternative strategies designed to lead to improve reading, that we now turn our attention.

There is some evidence that Augustus had to pay particular attention to literacy skills and expend time and energy learning, compensating through the application of conscious effort (Nicolson & Fawcett, 1994). Suetonius tells us that

> *During the war at Mutina, amid such a press of affairs, he is said to have read, written and declaimed every day. (II, LXXXIV)*

It is extraordinary that during a battle Augustus felt the need and had the determination to continue practicing his literacy skills. In his writing style, we can see another compensatory strategy of lexical context (Nation & Snowling,1998) so that he could read it back more easily. Suetonius tells us that

> *he did not hesitate to use prepositions with names of cities, nor to repeat conjunctions several times, the omission of which causes some obscurity, though it adds grace. (II, LXXXVI)*

What Augustus is doing here is adding context to his writing; in this way, he is limiting the amount of guessing he has to do when he accesses the semantic system through the lexical route when reading, given that he has difficultyusing the nonlexical route, where he would have been able to construct the word from the bottom up. If Augustus does not recognise a word because it is not well represented in his lexicon, then he has to build up as much context as he can to help narrow down possible fits and thus aid his guesses. He does this by adding the helper words of prepositions and conjunctions at the expense of style. More fluent readers would be able to infer these from the verbs themselves. Augustus is compensating by adding context and meaning (Snowling, Bishop, & Stothard, 2000).

Given his suspected impairment, Augustus would have had difficulty reading low-frequency words, as these would not have been well represented in his lexicon. There is some evidence that he took pains to avoid coming across these words.

> *Avoiding the vanity of attempts at epigram and an artificial order, and as he himself expresses it, the'noisomeness of farfetched words', (II, LXXXVI)*

and again,

> *he looked on innovators and archaizers 'with equal contempt,' (II, LXXXVI)*

One reading of this would suggest that Augustus is aware of his limitations and is taking pains to avoid situations where he would be confronted by the difficulty of not having the word well represented in his lexicon and not being able to read the word through the nonlexical route. There is further evidence of this preference for lexical processing in his writing. Suetonius tells us that

> *I have also observed this special peculiarity in his manner of writing: he does not divide words or carry superfluous letters from the end of one line to the beginning of the next, but writes them just below the rest of the word and draws a loop around them. (II, LXXXVI)*

In building up the sound of a word through the nonlexical route, carrying the letters forward to the start of the next line would not pose too much of a problem for normal readers. However, it makes it difficult when processing a word through the lexical route, as the word is broken up, and is therefore presumably more difficult to match. This could be evidence of compensation through relying on visual memory (Ullman & Pullman, 2015). Each of these compensatory strategies could be present in normal readers; however, it is the range of them used, and that they are still being utilised in adulthood that is indicative.

If anything, Augustus represents a picture of a compensated dyslexic who has a strong regard for literacy and a deep motivation to master these skills. Indeed, as someone who had an age of literature named after him he too had pretentions towards being a writer. Suetonius tells us that he wrote numerous works of prose but that his poetic output was limited. One could speculate that poetry, which its reliance on metre, would have been difficult for him to master, given his weakness in phonological processing. His frustration with literary composition can be seen in the following comment by Suetonius:

Though he began a tragedy with much enthusiasm, he destroyed it because his style did not satisfy him, and when some of his friends asked him what in the world had become of Ajax, he answered that his Ajax had fallen on his sponge. (II, LXXXV)

Of course, it is difficult to more than speculate on the role that Augustus's dyslexia would have had on his abilities as a writer, albeit that such frustrations as described above would be consistent.

Although each of these signs on their own could be accounted for in ways which would not imply dyslexia, taken in the whole they do contribute to a compelling case that Suetonius was describing a case of high functioning developmental dyslexia in an adult. Given that this pattern would not have been known at the time, the likelihood of Suetonius confabulating it is low. Consequently, Suetonius was describing signs in Augustus, which were noticed as out of the ordinary and therefore noted down. If we accept this argument, then Suetonius may have described the earliest known case of developmental dyslexia.

CONCLUSION

We have not proved that Augustus was dyslexic to the rigorous requirements of a modern diagnosis and this was not our intention, Rather, we sought to suggest the strong probability that the man who was the architect of imperial Rome and who developed systems of government that resound today 2,000 years later suffered from clear signs of Developmental Dyslexia.

It starts simply enough from Suetonius' remark that Augustus had a difficulty with spelling which is inconsistent with his educational and ability. Suetonius did not know that difficulty with spelling in adulthood is often a sign and sometimes the only sign of the existence of development dyslexia, but he knew that it was remarkable enough to highlight in his account of Augustus' life.

Moving on from this simple observation, a close reading of Suetonius's account reveals evidence of associated signs: difficulty in reading and pronouncing low frequency words, the use of strategies to increase context and thereby increase reading accuracy, difficulty with second language learning, and possible memory problems. These reported behavioural signs present a pattern of some consistency. Given that developmental dyslexia was not known at that time, the possibility of feigning this pattern is considerably reduced, or at least a strong argument can bemade for this.

If this line of reasoning can be accepted, then Seutonius's account of Augustus's literacy difficulties would represent the earliest description of developmental dyslexia that we have.

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