

**Zeitschrift:** Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

**Band:** 68 (2011)

**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** Which Gaius Julius Caesar (Suet., Calig. 8.1)?

**Autor:** Woods, David

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-178534>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 20.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Which Gaius Julius Caesar (Suet., *Calig.* 8.1)?

By David Woods, Cork

*Abstract:* In his discussion concerning the birthplace of the emperor Gaius Julius Caesar, better known as Caligula, Suetonius quotes an elegiac couplet in circulation at his accession. It is argued that this couplet may derive from a lost poem in honour of Gaius Julius Caesar (d. AD4), the grandchild and adopted son of Augustus, but that it was circulated at the accession of his later namesake as an omen of his rule.

Suetonius devotes considerable space and effort to establishing the birthplace in AD12 of the future emperor Gaius Julius Caesar, better known as Caligula (Suet., *Calig.* 8), the name by which I will call him henceforth for the sake of clarity. He rebuts in detail the claims both of Gnaeus Lentulus Gaetulicus that he had been born at Tibur, about 20 miles east of Rome, and of Pliny the Elder that he had been born in the village of Ambitarvium near Trier in Belgica. Instead, he claims to have discovered in the *acta urbis* that Caligula had been born at Antium, about 35 miles south of Rome. To judge from Suetonius, Pliny had adduced one main piece of evidence in support of his claim, the presence in Ambitarvium of several altars bearing the inscription *ob Agrippinae puerperium*. Suetonius also reports that an elegiac couplet in circulation immediately following the accession of Caligula had alleged his birth in a legionary camp. It is not entirely clear from Suetonius' text whether he derives his knowledge of this couplet from Pliny also, or from another source that he prefers to leave anonymous, but he clearly understands this couplet to support Pliny's claim that Caligula had been born at Ambitarvium on the frontier. For this reason, and because Pliny has already refuted Gaetulicus' claim, Suetonius devotes most of his effort to disproving Pliny's claim. His first argument is that Pliny had got his basic chronology wrong, because historians of the reign of Augustus agreed that Germanicus had not been sent to Germany until after the birth of Caligula, his second is that he had misunderstood the inscriptions on the altars, because the term *puerperium* does not necessarily refer to a son, and his third is that the ancient documentary evidence disproved it, because he had discovered a letter by Augustus himself revealing that Agrippina had taken Caligula with her to Germany in AD14. After all this, he swiftly dismisses the evidence of the elegiac couplet on two grounds, the first being that he has already disproved the argument that it is supposed to support, the second that its anonymous nature reduces its credibility as evidence.

Most commentators now accept that Suetonius' argument that Caligula was born at Antium rather than elsewhere is probably correct<sup>1</sup>. If this indeed is the case, then what is one to make of the couplet used to support his birth in a camp? What exactly was its origin or purpose? The modern commentaries upon Suetonius' text have relatively little to say about this beyond drawing attention to the fact that Tacitus uses vaguely similar wording in description of Caligula which may suggest that the couplet was known to him also<sup>2</sup>. Any analysis of the couplet must begin by paying due attention to Suetonius' own words as he introduces it, as well as to the text of the couplet itself:

*Versiculi imperante mox eo divulgati apud hibernas legiones procreatum indicant:  
in castris natus, patriis nutritus in armis,  
iam designati principis omen erat*<sup>3</sup>.

Let us assume that Suetonius is probably correct when he claims that it circulated early during the reign of Caligula. It is important to note, however, that he does not say that it was composed then. Therefore, there are two possibilities, either that the anonymous author composed it during this period on the basis of a faulty assumption, because of Caligula's nickname and stories about his presence as a child with his father Germanicus in Germany<sup>4</sup>, that he had been born there also<sup>5</sup>, or that those who set it into circulation re-applied a pre-existing

- 1 See e.g. M. Gelzer, "Julius 133", *RE* 10,1 (1918) 381–382; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> I 217; J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius (Caligula)* (Oxford 1934) 4; E. Koestermann, *Cornelius Tacitus: Annalen. Band I, Buch 1–3* (Heidelberg 1963) 165; A. Ferrill, *Caligula: Emperor of Rome* (London 1991) 14; A. Winterling, *Caligula: Eine Biographie* (Munich 2003) 158; G.W. Adams, *The Roman Emperor Gaius 'Caligula' and His Hellenistic Aspirations* (Boca Raton 2007) 74. A.A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (London 1989) 6–7, does not commit himself, while R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) 379, declares that the question 'hardly matters'.
- 2 Tac., *Ann.* 1.41.2: *iam infans in castris genitus, in contubernio legionum eductus*. J.A. Maurer, *A Commentary on C. Suetonii Tranquilli Vita C. Caligulae Caesaris Chapters I–XXI* (Philadelphia 1949) 34, comments only on punctuation and grammar; H. Lindsay, *Suetonius: Caligula* (London 1993) 65, claims that 'Tacitus clearly paraphrases this couplet'; D.W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' Life of C. Caligula*, *APA American Classical Studies* 32 (Atlanta 1993) 21, agrees that 'Tacitus paraphrases the couplet instead of quoting it'; D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: A Commentary*, *Collection Latomus* 225 (Brussels 1994) 131, seems to reject this on the basis that 'the resemblance is not close'.
- 3 M. Ihm (ed.), *C. Suetonius Tranquillus: Opera I*, *Bibliotheca Teubneriana* (Leipzig 1933) 156. See also J. Blänsdorf (ed.), *Fragmenta Poetarum Latinorum Epicorum et Lyricorum praeter Ennium et Lucilium*, *Bibliotheca Teubneriana* (Leipzig 1995) 309; E. Courtney, *The Fragmentary Latin Poets* (Oxford 1993) 479.
- 4 Sen., *Const.* 18.4; Suet., *Calig.* 9; Tac., *Ann.* 1.41.2, 69.4.
- 5 The faulty assumption need not have been accidental. D.W. Hurley, "The Politics of Agrippina the Younger's Birthplace", *AJAH* 2 (2003) 95–117, at 113–114, suggests that the couplet may have been a piece of political propaganda deliberately circulated in order to enhance Caligula's acceptability as *princeps* 'by providing him with ersatz military credentials in lieu of the genuine ones that he lacked'. S. Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London 1990) 75, also suggests that it may have been used for propaganda purposes, but to emphasize the 'togetherness' of the imperial family.



verse to Caligula, although on the basis of the same faulty assumption once more. The latter possibility seems to have been generally ignored, but deserves further exploration. If those who set the couplet into circulation re-applied a pre-existing verse to Caligula, then there are two reasons why they may have done so. One possibility is that it was simply the most convenient thing to do, to re-apply a pre-existing couplet to Caligula rather than to compose a new one, and that they were simply using it to celebrate the fact of his accession and no more. The second possibility is that they re-applied the pre-existing couplet to him because they believed that it was an omen that had prophesized his rule, even if no-one had realized this at the time. Therefore, by circulating it, they meant to celebrate not merely the fact of his accession, but the fact that the gods, or fate, had pre-ordained this long ago. The fact that the couplet also describes a purported omen would only have encouraged such an interpretation. Of course, this explanation of its origin requires that the couplet had once been composed in honour of a historical person, a member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty who had been expected to succeed to the role of *princeps*, even if he never actually did. It may not be entirely coincidental, therefore, that the couplet reads equally well, if not more aptly even, when applied to Caligula's namesake, Gaius Julius Caesar, the eldest son of Marcus Agrippa by Julia the Elder, than when applied to Caligula himself.

Gaius Julius Caesar, as he was known following his adoption by Augustus in 17BC, was born sometime in 20BC. During his account of Augustus' activities in the east that year, Dio (54.8.5) briefly notes that Julia gave birth to a boy who was named Gaius and that a permanent annual sacrifice was established on his birthday. However, he does not specifically identify where she was located at the time that she gave birth, and his words should not be read to mean that she had necessarily been situated at or near Rome. While he locates his notice among various measures that Augustus took concerning the city of Rome, the text does not require any more than that Augustus ordered the news of his establishment of a permanent sacrifice in honour of his grandson be communicated to Rome, along with his other measures. Dio (54.6.5) reveals that Marcus Agrippa had married Julia in Rome sometime during 21BC, and that, while he had stayed there for some unknown period in order to restore order, he left sometime during 20BC in order to pursue military campaigns, first against the Germans who were attacking Gaul, then against the rebellious Cantabrians in Spain (54.11.1–2)<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, there is no evidence at all as to Julia's whereabouts at this time, whether she followed him to Gaul at least, or remained at Rome<sup>7</sup>. A chance literary anecdote reveals that she was with Agrippa in the east in 14BC, when she

6 On Agrippa's activities in Gaul and Spain, see J.-M. Roddaz, *Marcus Agrippa* (Rome 1984) 383–418. The nature of Agrippa's position at this period remains uncertain. W.K. Lacey, *Augustus and the Principate: The Evolution of the System* (Leeds 1996) 117–131, suggests that he was *praefectus classis et orae maritimae* from 26BC onwards.

7 In general, see E. Fantham, *Julia Augusta: The Emperor's Daughter* (Abingdon 2006) 56–67.

nearly drowned in the Scamander while on a visit to Ilium, so she was certainly accustomed to visit him on his tours abroad by this later date<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the weight of evidence suggests that it was normal for the wives of senior imperial officials to accompany their husbands abroad during this period<sup>9</sup>. Hence it would not be at all surprising had Julia accompanied Agrippa to Gaul, or visited him there later, and it remains a strong possibility that Gaius was born in a legionary camp exactly as the couplet claims for its subject.

As for the claim that the subject of the couplet had been reared amidst ancestral arms, much depends upon how literal one wants to be in one's interpretation of this description. It was not true in any absolute sense of either Caligula or Gaius. Neither can have spent their whole childhoods among the soldiers at or near a frontier, since neither's father spent more than a relatively short period during their youths engaged in active military campaigning. Hence this description may be as true of Gaius, if his mother had spent much of the period 20–19BC with her husband while he campaigned in Gaul and Spain, and brought him with her, as it was of Caligula himself who presumably remained with his mother while she spent most of the period AD14–16 at or near the frontier during Germanicus' campaigns deep into German territory. All the phrase requires is that its subject had been reared for some short time among soldiers, and this remains possible for Gaius, even if his father did not spend quite so much time on active campaign in 20–19BC as did Germanicus in AD14–16. On the other hand, if one prefers to interpret the description of being reared among ancestral arms a little less literally, to mean only that the subject of this description accompanied a father who had the authority to command troops rather than that he did so on active campaign, then it would remain true of both Gaius and Caligula throughout their youths, since, in the case of Gaius, both Agrippa and Augustus enjoyed *imperium proconsulare maius* throughout his youth, while Germanicus appears to have been granted the same when despatched to the east in AD17 following his successes on the Rhine.

The strongest argument for identifying Julia's eldest son as the true subject of the couplet lies in its description of its subject as *princeps designatus*. There is a striking similarity between this description and the language of a decree issued in his honour by Pisa shortly after his death in AD4 when it describes him as *iam designatum iustissimum ac simillimum parentis sui virtutibus principem*<sup>10</sup>. Since Gaius was Augustus' first grandchild and his first male descendant, whom he had even adopted as his son in 17BC, it must have been clear to all from a very early stage that he was Augustus' favourite choice to succeed him. Furthermore, the art

8 A fragment by Nicolaus of Damascus. See C. Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum III* (Paris 1849) 350; *FGrHist* 90 A 134.

9 A.A. Barrett, "Augustus and the Governors' Wives", *RhM* 149 (2006) 129–147.

10 *ILS* 140. See also V. Ehrenberg and A.H.M. Jones, *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius* (Oxford 1955) no. 69. For an English translation, see M.G.L. Cooley (ed.), *The Age of Augustus* (London 2003) J61.



of the period commemorated both him and his brother ever more prominently<sup>11</sup>. Finally, the fact that Tiberius, the eldest of Augustus' stepsons, sought voluntary retirement on Rhodes in 6BC, where he remained until AD2, must have removed the last possible doubt in the minds of the populace as a whole as to the identity of Augustus' preferred successor<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, Aulus Gellius (*NA* 15.7.3) preserves a copy of a letter written by Augustus himself in September AD1 which he concludes by reporting that he was watching Gaius and his brother Lucius prove themselves as they waited to replace him<sup>13</sup>. Hence some authors, particularly if they were the authors of anonymous verse, may well have dared to refer to Gaius as *princeps designatus* during the last years of his life even, but it was certainly permissible to describe him as such after his death. In contrast, Tiberius never bestowed any special honours upon Caligula that marked him out publicly and clearly as his probable successor, and his astrologer Thrasyllus had even reassured him at one point that Caligula had no more chance of ruling the empire than of riding with horses across the bay of Baiae (Suet., *Calig.* 19.3). No-one who had observed Tiberius' cruel treatment of Caligula's mother and brothers could reasonably have expected that Tiberius would allow him to succeed him, and certainly not at the expense of his natural grandson Tiberius Gemellus. That this is what eventually happened says more about Caligula's ability to corrupt the praetorian prefect Macro, and probably Thrasyllus also, than it does about Tiberius' intentions. It is clear, therefore, that the couplet's reference to its subject as *princeps designatus* must be interpreted in very different ways when applied to Gaius and Caligula. In the first case, it was Augustus who marked out Gaius as the *princeps designatus* by the favours that he showed him. In the second case, however, it was the gods, or fate, that marked out Caligula as a *princeps designatus*, even if no one realized this before, contrary to all natural expectations, he did become *princeps*. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the description can be applied equally well either to Gaius or Caligula, even if one has to interpret its significance rather differently in each case.

It was not unusual for Romans to read an omen into a pre-existing text following the event that it was supposed to have foretold. For example, Cornelius Balbus, a friend and adviser of the dictator Julius Caesar, reported that some colonists at Capua had discovered an ancient bronze tablet bearing a Greek inscription foretelling the death of Julius Caesar, although this did not become clear until after the event<sup>14</sup>. The temptation to read prophetic meaning back into poetic works in particular led eventually to the use of Virgil's *Aeneid* in this man-

11 See P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor 1988) 215–223.

12 See J. Bellemore, "Tiberius and Rhodes", *Klio* 89 (2007) 417–453.

13 On Gaius' activities during this period, see F.E. Romer, "Gaius Caesar's Military Diplomacy in the East", *TAPA* 109 (1979) 199–214.

14 Suet., *Jul.* 81.1–2. Whether the discoverers of the inscription read it correctly is another matter altogether. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the inscription was in verse or not. For a later parallel, see e.g. Amm. Marc. 31.1.4, a verse inscription. On Balbus, see R. Masciantonio, "Balbus the Unique", *CW* 61 (1967) 134–138.

ner, by the fourth century at latest<sup>15</sup>. While it has been argued that the threefold structure of the couplet in this instance bears a strong resemblance to that of a riddle, it has also been pointed out that it would not have been a very good riddle in the context<sup>16</sup>. In fact, there is nothing that prevents its identification as a brief extract from a fuller poetic work. The fact that Suetonius did not himself recognize the couplet as an extract from a fuller work tells us no more than that his immediate source did not identify it as such, and that it did not derive from a very distinguished work<sup>17</sup>. Given the political significance of Gaius Caesar and the tragic nature of his early death, it seems as likely to have inspired poetic commemoration as did the death of Augustus' youngest stepson Drusus in 9BC. That inspired an unknown author to compose a poem of consolation to his mother Livia in 476 elegiac lines, and it is possible that our couplet derives from a similar text<sup>18</sup>. It was normal for new emperors to review the events of their lives and to point to omens from their earliest youth that they had always been destined to rule<sup>19</sup>. More importantly, it was normal for the wider public also to seek to identify omens that the new emperor's accession had long been foretold, whether out of genuine piety or a hope for reward<sup>20</sup>. Nothing is more certain, therefore, than that, at the accession of Caligula, many would have sought to identify the omens that, by their reckoning at least, must have foretold this event, even if Suetonius does not in this instance preserve a list of such. In this context, and given the ambiguous nature of most alleged omens, it would not have been at all surprising for some interested persons to review material relating to Caligula's distinguished namesake in the hope that this might contain some previously unnoticed omen of his sudden rise to power. It would have only been a matter of time, therefore, before someone noticed that a poem composed in praise of Gaius Julius Caesar contained a couplet that could, in hindsight, be interpreted in reference to the new emperor, or so it was thought.

In conclusion, it is arguable that the anonymous couplet which Suetonius quotes during the course of his discussion of the identity of the birthplace of Caligula is identifiable as a couplet from a lost poem in honour of his namesake,

15 See e.g. Y. de Kisch, "Les *Sortes Vergilianae* dans l'Histoire Auguste", *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 82 (1970) 321–362.

16 See A. Taylor, "An Allusion to a Riddle in Suetonius", *AJPh* 6 (1945) 408–410. Wardle, *loc. cit.* (note 2 above) 131, describes it as 'undemanding'.

17 F.R. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus I (Annals I.1–54)*, Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 15 (Cambridge 1972) 286, even dismisses the couplet as 'doggerel verses'.

18 See H. Schoonhoven, *The Pseudo-Ovidian Ad Liviam De Morte Drusi* (Groningen 1992). More recently, see T.E. Jenkins, "Livia the *Princeps*: Gender and Ideology in the *Consolatio ad Liviam*", *Helios* 36 (2009) 1–25. Augustus also had a verse epitaph which himself had composed inscribed on Drusus' tomb (Suet., *Claud.* 1.5).

19 Unfortunately, Suetonius does not devote equal attention to this subject in each of his lives. For a lengthy list of omens pointing to the rule of Augustus, see Suet. *Aug.*, 94–95. For another long list of omens in the case of Vespasian, see Suet., *Vesp.* 5.

20 In general on the popular attitude towards omens, see P. Ripat, "Roman Omens, Roman Audiences, and Roman History", *G&R* 53 (2006) 155–174.



Gaius Julius Caesar, the son of Marcus Agrippa and Julia the Elder. Suetonius does not tell us why exactly people circulated this couplet immediately upon the accession of Caligula because he is too caught up in his argument concerning his birthplace, and is not really interested in this couplet except in so far as it contributes to this debate. However, the timing of its circulation, the nature of its content, and the probable identity of its original subject as the namesake of Caligula, suggest that it was probably circulated as an omen pointing to the accession of Caligula.

Correspondence:

David Woods,  
Department of Classics,  
University College Cork,  
Western Road,  
Cork, Ireland  
d.woods@ucc.ie