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WHEN DID GAIUS CALIGULA DIE?*

When the death of a notorious emperor coincided with a major Roman festival and when the historical and biographical sources for his principate agree as to its date, it may seem improbable that dispute should have arisen. However, T.P. Wiseman has rejected the overwhelming modern consensus which had taken at face value Suetonius' testimony that Gaius Caligula was assassinated on January the 24th AD 41.

No epigraphic record of the date of Gaius Caligula's death or of Claudius' accession has survived. Some calendars at the very least will have recorded his death, if without the note of sadness in the *Fasti Amicetri* at Augustus' passing, 'dies tristissimus'. An extant fragment of the *Fasti Ostienses* marks Tiberius' death: 'XVII k. Apr. Ti. Caesar Misen[i] excessit'. But if the surviving fragments of the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* are typical of the records of the Roman priestly colleges, they did not commemorate with sacrifice the death or anniversary of the death of the early emperors.

We depend therefore on the evidence of literary sources which provide two kinds of data, length of principates and calendar dates. Suetonius preserves the date VIII Kal. Febr., 24th January. All the extant manuscripts support this reading; and as they read VIII rather than IX, the probability of an error for XI would seem small. With Dio things are more
complicated: of Tiberius' death he writes μετήλλαξε τῇ ἐκτῇ καὶ εἰκοστῇ τοῦ Μαρτίου ἡμέρᾳ. 5 26th March AD 37. As the last quaternion of Book 59 is not extant, we are dependent on Dio's excerptors for the length of Gaius Caligula's principate: Γάλως μὲν δὲ ταῦτα ἐν ἔτεσι τριῶ καὶ μηνιν ἔννεα ἡμέραις τε ὀκτὼ καὶ εἴκοσι πράξεως. 6 Taking this at face value Dio fixes the date as the 23rd January AD 41, in modern terms: three years and nine months from 26th March AD 37 gives 26th December AD 40; since December, after Julius Caesar had added two days, 7 had thirty-one days, Dio's twenty-eight days take us to 23rd January AD 41, which disagrees with Suetonius' date. However, as a wider examination of Dio's calculation of dates and lengths of principates reveals, his actual procedure is not certain. 8 Four basic methods of calculating dates were possible: (a) inclusive reckoning, counting both the day at the beginning and at the end, (b) compensative reckoning, counting the day at one end only, (c) exclusive reckoning counting the day at neither end, 9 and (d) calculating by either of these methods from dates given in their Roman terms. The first three methods give respectively, in the modern form of dates, 22nd, 23rd and 24th January AD 41. If we take Dio's dates for the death of Tiberius in Roman terms, VII Kal. Apr., the three methods yield XI, X and IX Kal. Febr. respectively, again 22nd, 23rd and 24th January. Therefore, to have arrived at 24th January, which Suetonius supports and modern calculation gives, Dio must on either Greek or Roman forms of dating have calculated exclusively. As this is the only example in either his Greek or his Roman forms of such calculation, 10 Snyder offers a further explanation: 'the interval of three years nine months and twenty-eight days might also have been obtained by considering the period as three years, ten months lacking two days and reckoning the month at thirty days in making the subtraction'. 11 However, Dio elsewhere preserves the formula 'lacking x days', 12 so we should not assume he calculated this way when he does not use it. Moreover, the crucial months of December, January and March all contained thirty-one days.

We should ask whether Dio's dates for the early Julio-Claudians' principates are internally consistent. Firstly the data:

(i) Augustus ruled forty four years less thirteen days (56.30.5) — 2nd September 31 BC – 19th August AD 14;
(ii) Tiberius ruled twenty-two years, seven months and seven days (58.28.5): 19th August AD 14 – 26th March 37; 13
(iii) Gaius Caligula ruled three years, nine months and twenty-eight days (59.30.1): 26th March 37 – 24th January 41; 14
(iv) Claudius ruled thirteen years, eight months and twenty days (60.34.3): 24th January 41– 13th October 54. 15
There is a general consistency in that the duration of principates does span 2nd September 30 BC to 13th October AD 54, two *termini* fixed by external criteria. However, different modes of calculation appear necessary for the individual principates: Augustus’ principate requires either an exclusive calculation in Greek terms or compensative reckoning from the dates in their Roman form; Tiberius’ principate requires a compensative calculation in either Greek or Roman terms; Gaius Caligula’s principate requires exclusive calculation in both, whereas Claudius’ requires inclusive calculation in Greek or compensative in Roman terms. Why such a variety of calculations appear side by side in the one author is not addressed by Snyder. To invoke a multiplicity of sources, or rather one separate source for each emperor would seem improbable, even though the major annalistic histories on which Dio drew are not extant.

Both Dio and Suetonius can support 24th January. Can this be harmonised with our other evidence that Gaius Caligula’s death coincided with the *Ludi Palatini*?

Dio’s excerptor Xiphilinus records ἐορτήν τινα ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ ἡγε χαλ θέαν ἐπετείκει, Suetonius ‘cum placuisset Palatinius ludis spectaculo egressum meridie adgredi’ and Josephus describes in detail the physical setting and occasion of the games. Although his description of Augustus as τοῦ πρώτου μεταστρομένου τὴν ἀρχήν τοῦ δῆμου Καῖσαρος εἰς αὐτὸν is somewhat surprising and his words might more readily suggest Julius Caesar, the reference to Augustus is secure and the games are those consecrated to his memory by Livia in January AD 15. It is probable that Livia extended the celebrations in AD 15, since during his lifetime Augustus’ birthday had received only two days’ celebration — would the wedding anniversary have merited more? Dio informs us that these first memorial games lasted three days and, with the information of the *Fasti Verulani*, they began on 17th January and ended on the 19th. The literary calendars of Filocalus from AD 354 and of Silvius, who used Filocalus, show that by the time of the emperor Gordian the games lasted five days. But, since Gordian’s birthday fell on 20th January and could not be subsumed within the usual festival, the actual festivities covered six days, from 17th to 22nd.

Their length under Gaius Caligula is another matter. He was infamous for lengthening celebrations and even for ordering recollections, probably on the grounds of irregularity in the religious ceremony. Dio records Claudius’ reform of the abuse, although his narrative of Gaius Caligula’s principate provides no examples. Gaius Caligula’s handling of the *ludi Palatini* before AD 41 is unknown; the only possible *datum* is Dio’s passing remark that the Senate decreed sacrifices to his *Clementia* χαλ ἐν ταῖς τῷ παλατίῳ προσφοράσσας, which says nothing about their length. However, for the events of early 41, in addition to Dio’s record preserved only by his excerptors, we have the detailed account by Josephus in *Antiquitates*
Judaicae 19. Both texts follow as the manuscripts preserve them:

The crucial part of Josephus' text, as it stands, must be understood as 'with Gaius Caligula adding the three days to the prescribed days, they barely accomplished the deed on the last'. However, Feldman reads and translates 'having let pass the three days prescribed for the spectacles ...'. A useful independent, but far from infallible, guide to the original Greek text is often the Latin translation of Josephus which was organised by Cassiodorus in the late 6th century. On this occasion its version of the crucial words most readily accords with the emended Greek text:

exspectabat ergo Chaereas, et venientibus spectaculis, prima die nitebatur, ut quod fuerat praecogitatum, sine dilatione fortunae solatiis adimpleret, a quo tamen tribus diebus ludorum transactis, vix die novissimo opus valebat terminari.

Clearly the unemended Greek text can be harmonised very easily with that of Dio's excerptors to give an eight day celebration of the ludi Palatini. However, can the unemended text stand?

There are powerful linguistic arguments against translating by 'adding': firstly, it seems clear that should bear the same meaning. Secondly that meaning should be 'delay', 'postpone' or 'let pass': Josephus' use of间隔 in connection with intervals of time is conclusive; and in particular the meaning is repeated in the continuation of Josephus' narrative here. No examples of meaning 'add' exist in Josephus or are quoted by Liddell and Scott for any other Greek author. Thirdly, is very isolated if the reader is to add mentally , as Cavallaro requires, we might expect at least an as at AJ 19.76.

What then of Dio and the emended Josephus? Are they incompatible and what dates for the assassination do they support? Dio has the conspirators wait five days; then three further days were announced. He does not state that they waited until the last of the additional days, which would have been 24th January; indeed the continuation oixeth' oI peI tOn Xairoavn
... may suggest that they did not wait. Strictly, then, Dio could date the assassination any time between the fifth and eighth day of celebrations. Josephus has the conspirators wait three days and perform the assassination of the last day of the ludi. However, he does not state that the third day of the ludi was the last; indeed his failure to do so and his stress upon the regular length of the ludi, τὰς τρεῖς ... τὰς νομίμους ἡμέρας, may suggest that he too was aware of additional days decreed by Gaius Caligula.

Even if this understanding of both texts is plausible, they need not be incompatible, but dating the assassination from them is not facilitated, since all dates between the 19th and 24th are strictly possible. Nonetheless, by combining Josephus' information that the assassination took place on the last day and Dio's information as to their length, we can accept Suetonius' explicit date.

As long as there is no epigraphic evidence, from, for example, ancient calendars, to fix the date of Gaius Caligula's assassination, we must utilise the existing literary sources. The most convincing interpretation of them suggests January 24th: Dio is thereby consistent both internally and with Suetonius; the manuscript tradition of Suetonius is respected. Only Josephus' words are problematic, but even they need not clash with Dio and Suetonius.

NOTES

* This note was originally written for a volume informally presented to Professor F.G.B. Millar in 1990 by his post-graduate students at Oxford. I thank Mrs M.T. Griffin and Professor J.E. Atkinson for their comments on earlier versions. The usual disclaimers apply.


The chronological tables to D. Nony's biography of Caligula (Caligula, Paris 1986, 415), place Caligula's assassination on the 24th, but Nony's narrative of Caligula's last days (385, 390-1) appears to assign the assassination to the 21st, a date never before suggested and quite implausible.

The latest biographer of Caligula (A.A. Barrett, Caligula — the Corruption of Power, London 1989, 169f) considers Suetonius' date of the 24th January 'difficult to defend', but in neither narrative nor Appendix proposes a definite alternative.

4. Degrassi (above, n.1, 401), followed by Wiseman (above, n.1, 168), wrongly states that other manuscripts read VII or VIII Kal. Febr., i.e., January 26th or 25th. Cf. manuscript disagreement at Cal. 59 on the length of Caligula's reign.

5. 59.28.5.

6. 59.30.1; Xiphilinus 172, 20–22; Zonaras 11.7; John of Antioch fr. 84M.


9. These three methods were demonstrated by L. Holzapfel in his articles on Römische Kaiserdaten in Klio 12 (1912) 483–493 etc.

10. See Snyder 55, for five examples in Greek terms only: 59.30.5, the life of Augustus; 58.28.5, the life of Tiberius; 64.15.2, Otho’s reign; 68.4.2, Nerva’s reign; and 79.3.3 Heliogabalus’ reign.

11. (Above, n.8), 46.

12. E.g., 56.20.5, 63.29.3, 64.15.2, 65.22.1.

13. From Suetonius Tib. 73.1 and Tacitus Annales 6.50.4, whose testimony is confirmed by the Fasti Ostienses (L. Vidman, Pasti Ostienses, 2nd edition, Prague 1982, 43), we know that Tiberius died VII Kal. Apr., 16th March 37. Snyder (above, n.8, 45) explains Dio’s error by the omission of X from the Roman form of the date or by the corruption of Χ to Χ' in the Greek. However, because the age he gives for Caligula upon accession (59.6.1), twenty-five years, less five months four days, requires accession on 26th March, we should suspect that Dio’s date is deliberate. The alternative is to posit a second corruption or omission (as above), which might seem suspiciously convenient, or a harmonising of his figures by later scholars or copyists.

P. Grenade has argued (Essai sur les origines du principat: investiture et renouvellement des pouvoirs impériaux, Paris 1961 276f) that Dio deliberately avoids an hiatus between the death of Tiberius and the formal grant of imperial powers to Caligula by the Senate upon his arrival in Rome on March 28th. However, modern scholars plausibly stress the words of the Acta Fratrum Arvalium (CIL 6.2028) ‘a senatu imper[ator appellatus est]’ which refer to March 18th as indicating Caligula’s formal accession. Moreover, since both Suetonius and Tacitus prove there was no difficulty in fixing Tiberius’ death, we might expect that Dio would have filled any hiatus he believed there to be between Tiberius’ death and Caligula’s formal grant of powers by ‘extending’ Caligula’s reign.

If the dating of Tiberius’ death in Dio represents his erroneous belief, his treatment of Caligula’s accession specifically excludes a recusatio of imperial powers, which A. Jakobsen and H.M. Cotton (Historia 34 [1985] 497–504) invoke to explain the delay before their formal grant. Elsewhere Dio makes great play with the motif of recusatio and to have described one for Caligula would have heightened the δεμοκρατικότατος/μοναρχικότατος-analysis which dominates the opening chapters of Book 59.


Suetonius’ figure of three years, ten months and eight days, if the two termini are the 16th March AD 37 and the 24th January AD 41, requires compensative reckoning. A wider view suggests that Suetonius is more consistent than Dio when he gives detailed calculations, although in most cases he attempts no greater precision than the emperor’s age in years and months (Tib. 73.1; Claud. 45; Ner. 57.1; Galba 23; Vit. 18; Dom. 17.3): Augustus’ life (Aug. 100.1) is calculated compensatively;
Vespasian’s (Vesp. 25) inclusively (17th November AD 9–23rd June AD 79); and Titus’ (Tit. 11) compensatively (24th June AD 39–13th September 81).

15. The latter date is secure, cf. Suetonius Claud. 45, Tacitus Ann. 12.69.1, Seneca Aproc. 2.2.

16. Snyder (above, n.8), 45.

17. Snyder (above, n.8), 46.

18. For the meagre rewards of Quellenforschung in such circumstances, cf. F.G.B. Millar, A Study of Cassius Dio, Oxford 1964, 34f, 84.

19. 59.29.4. That Dio has another imprecise description in his other definite reference to the games (56.46.5): ἰδία δὲ τινὰ ... πανήγυριν ... τοι̑ς παλατίων is unproblematic, particularly since the former appears only in the excerptor.

20. AJ 19.75.87.


22. Tacitus Ann. 1.73.3; cf. Dio 56.46.5. For Furneaux, Tacitus’ language implies the earlier existence of the ludi, cf. F.R.D. Goodyear, The Annals of Tacitus, Volume 2, Cambridge 1981, 156f. ‘Soliendum ... interesse’ is the key phrase, suggesting pre-existence; we do not need Goodyear’s view that special weight should be attached to sacraeisset, that the ludi were not made sacri until Augustus’ death. Tacitus’ words are straightforward and his language unstrained, if he is allowed to mean that Livia took the pre-existing celebration of her wedding to Augustus (Fasti Verulani: ‘feriae ex senatus consulto, quod eo die I Augustus nupsit divo Augusto’) and dedicated it to the memory of Augustus.

23. Suetonius Aug. 57.1; the Fasti Verulani note only one day’s celebration of the wedding anniversary.


25. Cavallaro (above, n.24), 47. Degrassi, however, (above, n.1), 401, prefers that six days celebration was the norm before Gordian, and that his birthday was superimposed upon the existing ludi.

26. 60.6.4–5.

27. Cf R.F. Newbold, PACA 13 (1975) 30–35. Suetonius in the section of his Caligula ostensibly favourable to Caligula notes his extension of the Saturnalia (17.2) and the giving of ludi subiti (18.3).

28. 59.15.10. A reference to the Palatine games is assumed, e.g., by Fabricius, because the Senate’s vote belongs in January 39.

29. Dio 59.29.5–6.

30. AJ 19.77.

31. Cf Cavallaro (above, n.24), 45.

32. Josephus: Jewish Antiquities, Volume 9, London 1965, ad loc.: following the emendations of Ernestei and Lowth which were accepted by Naber.


34. Cf. AJ 19.47, for a similar juxtaposition of cognate noun and participle: τὰς μελλήσεις καὶ τῶν κακῶν τὰς ὑπερβαλλόμενων τιθέμενος, which Feldman translates ‘in his accounting delays and postponements of the event favoured the ruling party’. In a note he states that ὑπερβαλλόμενων is literally ‘exceeding’ or ‘excessive’. Rather, he misunderstands the expression πρὸς τῶν ὑπερβαλλόμενων which should be translated as ‘agreeable to the delayers’. Chaeerea recognised that his fellow-conspirators were lily-livered and took refuge in delay, as indeed Josephus spells out at AJ 19.70.


37. (Above, n.24), 45.

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