CAESAR AND NICOMEDES

Around 80 B.C., as a young man of about twenty years, Julius Caesar left Rome to join the staff of M. Minucius Thermus in Asia for military training. Thermus was busy with the subjugation of Mytilene, the last of the cities of Asia to hold out against Rome after the recent war with Mithridates, and sent Caesar to fetch a fleet from King Nicomedes IV of Bithynia. Suetonius (*Iul.* 2) reports that Caesar dawdled at the royal court, so that a rumour crept up of sexual congress with the king (*prostratae regi pudicitiae*); and the rumour only grew when a few days after his mission was accomplished, Caesar returned to Bithynia 'on the pretext of collecting money which was owed to a certain freedman, a client of his' (*per causam exigendae pecuniae, quae deberetur cuidam libertino clienti suo*).

Certainly, later in life the Roman was regularly accused of having shared the king's bed, and in a remarkable chapter of his biography (*Iul.* 49) Suetonius documents a number of instances. To give just some: Licinius Calvus mocked Caesar in some notorious verses; Bibulus called his colleague 'the queen of Bithynia' (*Bithynicam reginam*) in the edicts he issued during their consulship; Memmius charged Caesar with serving as the king's cupbearer at a large party, even in front of some merchants from the city of Rome, whose names were included in the indictment; and Cicero wrote that Caesar was led into the king's bedroom, that he lay on a golden couch arrayed in purple, and that 'the virginity of the one sprung from Venus was lost in Bithynia' (*florem … aetatis a Venere orti in Bithynia contaminatum*). In contrast to Suetonius, Plutarch (*Caes.* 2.3) refers to none of this material, and instead notes that after his departure from Rome, Caesar had only a short stay with Nicomedes.[1]

Modern biographers of Caesar have passed over the whole episode quickly, mainly offering some form of Suetonius' claim that Caesar's lingering at the king's court straightaway gave rise to allegations of an amorous relationship. Gelzer, in his main narrative, briefly registers the visit in Bithynia, and only in a footnote observes: 'Caesar's participation in the life of the court gave rise to obscene jokes, later interminably repeated.'[2] Meier, even closer to Suetonius, comments: 'When he was sent to Nicomedes, the king of the Bithynians, to take over a naval squadron, he is said to have shared the king's bed. Throughout his life this episode furnished his opponents and his soldiers with the matter for ribald jokes'.[3] Most recently, Kamm writes, 'Caesar spent enough time at court for scandalous innuendoes to be spread that he had prostituted himself to Nicomedes', while Goldsworthy speaks of rumours that 'spread rapidly'and repeats the contents of Memmius and Cicero's tales.[4] 'Ultimately', Goldsworthy says, 'it was a very good piece of gossip, playing on well-established Roman stereotypes'.[5] Easterners ands kings were disliked, royal courts held in low esteem, and thus 'the tale of the ageing, lecherous old ruler

[1] Plutarch's alternative chronology, defended (unconvincingly in my view) by L.-M. Günther, 'Caesar und die Seeräuber – eine Quellenanalyse', *Chiron* 29 (1999), 321–37 does not impinge on my arguments here.

[2] M. Gelzer, *Caesar: Politician and Statesman*, trans. P. Needham (Cambridge, 1968), 22 and n. 1.

[3] C. Meier, *Caesar*, trans. D.McLintock (London, 1995), 64. W. Will, *Julius Caesar: eine Bilanz* (Stuttgart, Berlin, and Cologne, 1992), 15–16 is similar.

[4] A. Kamm, *Julius Caesar. A Life* (London and New York, 2006), 31; A. Goldsworthy, *Caesar. The Life of a Colossus* (London, 2006), 66.

[5] Goldsworthy (n. 4), 67.

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deflowering the young, naïve aristocrat on his first trip abroad had a wide appeal'.[6] Goldsworthy considers the possible truthfulness of the basic story, but, like Suetonius himself, gives no final verdict.

While of course the allegation ultimately remains unverifiable, in the rest of this note I will suggest that although Caesar surely did spend some time with Nicomedes, it was only several years afterward that the incident really became of interest; and I will further show that Caesar in fact had a very different reason for spending time in Bithynia, ignored by ancient and modern biographers alike.

Like other Roman aristocrats, Caesar launched his career in public life – and thus came to the attention of his contemporaries in Rome – with his first appearance in the courts.[7] In 77 or perhaps early 76 B.C., after the death of Sulla, the young man prosecuted for provincial maladministration one of the Dictator's partisans, Cn. Cornelius Dolabella, who had served as governor of Macedonia and returned to celebrate a triumph.[8] The trial surely caused a stir; Cicero certainly attended, to hear the speeches of Dolabella's advocates, the famous pair of Hortensius and Cotta.[9] In the face of those skilled opponents, Caesar lost his case, but left a lasting record all the same of his eloquent denunciation in a published version of the prosecution. Tacitus (*Dial.* 34.7) says that it was still read in imperial times with admiration. Gellius, interested in a grammatical question, quotes a short portion of it (*NA* 4.16.8).[10]

We can infer that, quite typically, there was a third speech for the defence, offered by Dolabella himself, since Suetonius quotes a speech (*actio*) of that man in which he referred to Caesar as 'the queen's rival, the inner edge of the royal couch' (*paelicem reginae, spondam interiorem regiae lecticae*, *Iul.* 49.1).[11] It has rightly been observed by Amy Richlin that in Roman oratory allegations of passive homosexual activity such as this, along with other charges of sexual misconduct, were commonly directed against young men, or the youthful period of an older man's life.[12] That is, because *pudicitia* was an important characteristic of the ideal man in Rome, it was not infrequent to cast doubt on the *pudicitia* of one's opponent. An elaborate example can be found in the trial of the strikingly handsome Marcus Caelius, one of whose prosecutors, Sempronius Atratinus, called the accused a 'pretty-boy Jason' (*pulchellus Iason*).[13] Cicero, who in his published version of his defence felt obliged to devote some space to the allegation, explains (*Cael.* 6):

[6] Goldsworthy (n. 4), 67.

[7] On youthful prosecutions, see, e.g., Cic. *Cael.* 73, *De orat.* 1.121, 3.74; Quint. *Inst.* 12.6.1; Tac. *Dial.* 34.7 and note, e.g., L. R. Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar* (Berkeley, 1949), 98–9 and 112–16, with M.C. Alexander, '*Praemia* in the *quaestiones* of the late republic', *CPh* 80 (1985), 20–32; E. Fantham, *The Roman World of Cicero's* De Oratore (Oxford, 2004), 298–304.

[8] For sources see M.C. Alexander, *Trials in the Late Roman Republic* (Toronto, 1990), no. 140; the trial is discussed by E.S. Gruen, 'The Dolabellae and Sulla', *AJP* 87 (1967), 385–99, at 387–9.

[9] Cic. *Brut.* 317.

[10] Valerius Maximus (8.9.3) appears to know its contents too. For full testimony, see Malcovati, *ORF*[4] s.v. C. Iulius Caesar (no. 121) I.

[11] Malcovati, *ORF*[4] s.v. Cn. Cornelius Dolabella (no. 94) recognizes that Dolabella spoke on his behalf. Will (n. 3), 15 attributes the quotation to a speech in the Senate, but gives no arguments for doing so.

[12] For briefer discussions (with examples) see A. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus. Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, revised edition (New York and Oxford, 1992), 101–4; A. Richlin, 'Not before homosexuality: the materiality of the *cinaedus* and the Roman law against love between men', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (1993), 538–9; C.A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality. Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York and Oxford, 1999), 175. A fuller analysis on invective and *pudicitia* is now provided by R. Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, 2006), 281–318 (note especially 284, n. 16).

[13] Fortunatianus, *Ars. rhet.* 3.7 (= Malcovati *ORF*[4] no. 171 I fr. 7). T.P. Wiseman, *Catullus and*

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Nam quod obiectum est de pudicitia, quodque omnium accusatorum non criminibus, sed vocibus maledictisque celebratum est, id numquam tam acerbe feret M. Caelius, ut eum paeniteat non deformem esse natum. Sunt enim ista maledicta pervolgata in omnis quorum in adulescentia forma et species fuit liberalis. Sed aliud est male dicere, aliud accusare.

Now as regards what was thrown out about Caelius' sexual morals, and what was proclaimed by all his prosecutors, not as criminal charges, but abuse and insults, Marcus Caelius will never be so indignant about this that he may regret that he was not born unbecoming. For these insults are usual against all who in youth had a becoming figure and noble appearance. But it is one thing to insult, entirely another to make a criminal accusation.

Despite Cicero's pleas, the prosecution's allegations about Caelius' *pudicitia* probably were an important part of their effort to show that Caelius, charged with *vis*, was out of control and represented a danger to the community; but Cicero is surely right to suggest that in some oratorical contexts, reproaches on a man's *pudicitia*, however well-crafted, could be more ancillary, an effort to diminish his prestige generally rather than of primary evidentiary value.[14] At times, such reproaches might simply have been intended to humiliate and were, as Cicero argues, more throwaway.

Suetonius' quotation from Dolabella's speech *pro se* must constitute one such effort at humiliation. Indeed, an attack on his handsome young opponent's *pudicitia* was almost expected, as a way of diminishing Caesar and buttressing the speaker's own authority. The problem, though, was that Caesar was no Caelius, and had by all accounts been happily married since his mid-teenage years (and would stay married until his wife Cornelia died in 69 B.C.).[15] All Dolabella could find to work with was the time Caesar spent in Bithynia, including the visit to Nicomedes.[16] While it might be true that a rumour had already crept up directly after Caesar's mission, it is also possible that Dolabella invented the story, perhaps with some key details supplied to him by Thermus (the two *Sullani* must have known each other, as both were office-holders in 81 B.C.). It is entirely typical, as seen, of what one would have heard in the courts of Rome. What is certainly demonstrable is that Dolabella's version of the allegation is the earliest Suetonius could find, and Dolabella's speech – which was published – had to have been what made it widely familiar in Rome.[17] His *actio* from this renowned trial is the fount from which flowed all the later gossip, especially vigorous from 65 B.C. onwards, when Caesar's conduct during his aedileship started to arouse misgivings in some of his senatorial colleagues. In the years before, as Herman Strasburger brilliantly showed in *Caesars Eintritt in die Geschichte*, Caesar was not much noticed by his contemporaries: he was in many ways a plainly ordinary *nobilis*.

His World (Cambridge, 1985), 54–91 memorably reconstructs the trial. For Atratinus' *pulchellus* compare Cicero's punning label of Clodius as *pulchellus puer* (*Att.* 1.16.10).

[14] For this approach to invective in Cicero's (forensic) oratory (with discussion of previous models) see C.A. Craig, 'Audience expectations, invective, and proof', in J. Powell and J. Paterson (edd.), *Cicero the Advocate* (Oxford, 2004), 187–213. This need not mean that a Roman audience would have automatically dismissed charges about *pudicitia* as so many *topoi*: see also Langlands (n. 12), 310–16.

[15] For Caesar's loyalty to Cornelia see especially Suet. *Iul.* 1.2 and Plut. *Caes.* 1.1; cf. Suet. *Iul.* 6.1 and Plut. *Caes.* 5.2.

[16] Cf. H. Strasburger, *Caesars Eintritt in die Geschichte* (Munich, 1938), 36.

[17] When recounting versions of the Bithynian affairs, Suetonius mentions, in addition to Dolabella, Calvus, the elder Curio, Bibulus, Brutus, Memmius, and Cicero. Cicero's spoken remarks (and surely the letter too) belong to the 60s B.C. at the earliest, those of Bibulus, Curio, and Memmius to the time of first consulship (59 B.C.) or shortly afterwards, Calvus and Brutus to at least several years later. See, in general, Strasburger (n. 16), 24–44. I assume here that Dolabella's spoken speech corresponds to his published *actio*, but my larger argument still holds if the reference to Caesar and Nicomedes appeared only in the latter.

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Later in life, when his own soldiers jeered him with the affair with Nicomedes, Caesar (according to Dio 43.20.4) was so aggrieved that he swore on oath that it had never happened. Certainly the Dictator may have grown irritated with the charge. It may also be that it was he who spread the story that he returned to Bithynia on behalf of his client who was owed money: that not only gave an alternative explanation, but cast a positive light on Caesar, who, as we shall see, prided himself on the high regard he showed his dependents. And Roman creditors were well known to have important business in Bithynia.[18] Caesar might have told the story in his published version of Dolabella's prosecution, or a speech *For the Bithynians*, to be discussed shortly.

But in reality Caesar had another reason to spend time in Bithynia. Sent on the mission by Thermus, the opportunistic young aristocrat was seizing a chance to develop for himself the useful foreign *clientelae* that the kingdom could offer, not least with the royal family, however checkered their recent fortunes. These relationships were, as Ernst Badian has shown in a classic discussion, both of symbolic value (for they showed the influence of the Roman aristocrat) and might also lead to tangible benefit (e.g., the loan of precious artworks during an aedileship or the contribution of character witnesses in an extortion trial).[19] Any young *nobilis* was likely to seek them, and we know that Caesar was cultivating other clients around this time – for instance in Macedonia (as the prosecution of Dolabella shows) and in Greece (Caesar represented some Greeks in a proceeding against C. Antonius, again unsuccessful, soon after Dolabella's trial[20]). As is shown by later events, to be discussed shortly, Caesar succeeded in winning over new friends and clients in Bithynia. But, with Nicomedes' death, Caesar lost some of the advantage that he had acquired, for the kingdom passed to the Roman people (although those Romans in charge of the annexation undoubtedly took some of the king's wealth, which included works of art, for themselves[21]).

Still, Caesar stayed loyal to his Bithynian connections, as is demonstrated by the fragment of a speech he gave *For the Bithynians*, quoted by Aulus Gellius (*NA* 5.13.6):

vel pro hospitio regis Nicomedis vel pro horum necessitate quorum res agitur, refugere hoc munus, M. Iunce, non potui. nam neque hominum morte memoria deleri debet quin a proximis retineatur neque clientes sine summa infamia deseri possunt, quibus etiam a propinquis nostris opem ferre instituimus.

In view either of my guest-friendship with King Nicomedes or my relationship to those whose affairs are being discussed, Marcus Iuncus, I could not shrink from this duty. For neither should

[18] For loans undertaken by Nicomedes himself see App. *Mithr.* 11. On Bithynia in this period, with references to earlier literature, see R.D. Sullivan, *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome, 100–30 BC* (Toronto, 1990), 30–5.

[19] E. Badian, *Foreign Clientelae (264–70 B.C.)* (Oxford, 1958), 154–67. The topic is much discussed – and, even as views on the significance of *clientela* within Rome have changed, the importance of foreign *clientelae* continues to receive recognition. For some discussions see P.A. Brunt, *The Fall of the Roman Republic and Related Essays* (Oxford, 1988), 392–3; D. Braund, 'Function and dysfunction: personal patronage in Roman imperialism,' in A. Wallace-Hadrill (ed.), *Patronage in Ancient Society* (London, 1989), 137–52; J.-L. Ferrary, 'The Hellenistic world and Roman political patronage', in P. Cartledge, P. Garnsey, and E.S. Gruen (edd.), *Hellenistic Constructs. Essays in Culture, History, and Historiography* (Berkeley, 1997), 105–19; F. Canali de Rossi, *Il ruolo dei patroni nelle relazioni politiche fra il mondo Greco e Roma in età repubblicana ed augustea* (Munich, 2001); C.F. Eilers, *Roman Patrons of Greek Cities* (Oxford, 2002).

[20] The key discussion of the proceedings against Antonius is now C. Damon and C.S. Mackay, 'On the prosecution of C. Antonius in 79 B.C.', *Historia* 44 (1995), 37–55.

[21] Fest. p. 320 Lindsay. On the annexation see Sullivan (n. 18), 34–5 with the literature cited there.

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the remembrance of men be so obliterated by their death as not to be retained by those very close to them, nor can we, without the greatest disgrace, forsake clients to whom we are bound to render aid even against our kinfolk.

The context of the speech is elusive: delivered after the death of Nicomedes (in late 75 or 74 B.C.), it may represent, as Dahlmann first suggested, another prosecution *repetundarum*, perhaps against Iuncus himself, who served as governor of Asia in the period during which Bithynia was annexed.[22] The speech would have been given when Iunius Iuncus and Caesar returned from Asia, where they had clashed after Caesar's kidnapping by the pirates. Whatever the circumstances of the speech, Gellius' fragment provides precious evidence that Caesar had established a guest–host relationship with Nicomedes; *hospitium* was technically different from *clientela* (because, at least in principle, its participants were equal), but it still brought many of the same benefits and obligations.[23] The fragment also reveals that Caesar had acquired some other group of clients in Bithynia as well, whose affairs seem to have been linked to Nicomedes.

It may be that one of the Bithynians referred to in this fragment was in fact Nicomedes' daughter Nysa, on whose behalf Caesar spoke on what appears to have been a separate occasion.[24] According to Suetonius (*Iul.* 49.3), this speech, delivered before the Senate, enumerated the *beneficia* Caesar had enjoyed from the late king: one can safely assume that sexual activity was not in Caesar's list, which is precisely why on this occasion Cicero saw an opportunity for the joke (quoted by Suetonius) which was becoming standard: 'Leave those things out, I ask you, since it is well known both what he gave to you and what you gave to him!' (*remove istaec, oro te, quando notum est, et quid ille tibi et quid illi tute dederis*). The witticism notwithstanding, the episode again attests to the connections Caesar made as a young man.

In conclusion: it is Caesar's words in *For the Bithynians* and his efforts for Nysa that show what he achieved during his time in Bithynia. The whole episode provides another excellent example of foreign *clientelae* (and the related *hospitium*). On the other hand, Dolabella's allegation of a dalliance with Nicomedes, the first securely dated version of the story we know, fits naturally in the practice of the Roman courts. Future biographers of Caesar should fixate less on this and subsequent versions of the tale. Instead, they should see in Caesar's Bithynian sojourn an early, and previously neglected, step in the young noble's efforts to prepare himself for a political career in Rome.[25]

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[22] H. Dahlmann, 'Caesars Rede für die Bithynier', *Hermes* 73 (1938), 341–6, accepted by Gelzer (n. 2), 29 and n. 4. Alternatively, Münzer, *RE* s.v. Iuncus (4) suggested that Caesar gave the speech while Iuncus was still actually in Asia; for this view see also A.M. Ward, 'Caesar and the pirates II: the elusive M. Iunius Iuncus and the year 75/4', *AJAH* 2 (1977), 26–36.

[23] On the *de facto* overlapping of *hospitium* and *clientela* in this period see Badian (n. 19), 155.

[24] Münzer, *RE* s.v. Nysa (7) plausibly suggested that Caesar was speaking in 60 B.C., when Pompey's arrangements in the east were under discussion.

[25] It is omitted from L.R. Taylor 'The rise of Julius Caesar', *G&R* 4 (1957), 10–18, which reprises that author's fundamental studies of Caesar's early years. Along with Strasburger and Syme, Taylor helped forever to strip away some of the mythology surrounding the future Dictator's early life; this note is a contribution in that vein.

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