



Eduqas GCSE Latin
Component 2: Latin Literature and Sources
(Themes)
Superstition and Magic



SUETONIUS
*The portents before the
murder of Julius Caesar*

Teachers should not feel that they need to pass on to their students all the information from these notes; they should choose whatever they think is appropriate.

The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text.

The Teacher's Notes contain the follow:

- An **Introduction** to the author and the text, although students will only be asked questions on the content of the source itself.
- **Notes** on the text to assist the teacher.
- **Suggested Questions for Comprehension, Content and Style** to be used with students.
- **Discussion** suggestions and questions for students, and overarching **Themes** which appear across more than one source.
- **Further Information and Reading** for teachers who wish to explore the topic and texts further.

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Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge,

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Information about several of the pictures in this booklet, together with useful additional material for the Theme, may be found in the support available online for **Cambridge Latin Course, Book I, Stage 7** and **Book III, Stages 22-23**

SUETONIUS, *The portents before the murder of Julius Caesar* (*Divus Iulius* 81)

The dictator receives many signs of his impending assassination but refuses to heed any of them.

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (c.AD70 – after AD122) was secretary at the imperial palace in Rome and is best known to us for his *Lives of the Caesars*, biographies of Julius Caesar and the first eleven emperors of Rome. Our section is part of his narrative on Caesar's death and is one of the most famous accounts of this event.

Julius Caesar (100BC – 44BC) was a Roman statesman, general and writer who was instrumental in the unravelling of the Roman republic and the rise of the Empire. Following a bitter civil war against Pompey the Great and the Roman Senate, he emerged as undisputed leader of the Romans, although he assumed titles such as *consul* as if he had been elected to positions of power in regular circumstances. As his reforms to the established systems gathered pace (changing the calendar, establishing a police force, expanding the senate etc.) the senators grew increasingly alarmed and resentful. Eventually a group of self-styled 'Liberators' orchestrated his murder at a meeting of the senate in the Curia of Pompey on the 15th March 44BC. His assassination plunged the Roman world into yet another civil war.

This text has been lightly adapted: two sentences have been removed in order to reduce the length.

Notes

- futura caedes:** this passage relates to the omens preceding the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March, 44 BC.
- proximis diebus...pridie** (line 6) **ea vero nocte** (line 9): the use of time phrases in this section offers a kind of 'count down' to the assassination. At first, we are given brief summaries of the omens which occurred far in advance, then as we draw closer to the deed itself the detail, and the tension, increase.
in traiciendo Rubiconi flumini: following disagreements with the ruling elite over the extent of his power, in 49BC Caesar led his army from his province in Gaul towards Rome to pressurise the Senate into agreeing with his demands. The Rubicon River in northern Italy marked the boundary between his province (where he was allowed to command an army) and Italy (where he was not).
- pertinacissime pabulo:** the finality of the plosive (p sound) alliteration, coupled with the superlative, mirror the absolute obstinance of the animals.
flere: like most mammals, horses only use their tear ducts to remove irritants such as dust from their eyes – they never really weep as humans do. Suetonius, however, is more concerned with the dramatic impact of the scene!

5 **immolantem:** Caesar was sacrificing when the **haruspex** gave him the omen. For more on the work of the *haruspices* see the notes on Picture 4. Note that the name **Spurinna** is Etruscan, linking to his role as a **haruspex** and giving added portentous weight to his pronouncement. The verb **caveret** is brought to the front of the clause for further emphasis.

6 **Martias Idus:** the 15th March (see the Further Information for more detail). This was the day planned for the assassination of Caesar.

7-9 the translation here is **volucres** (birds) **varii generis** (of different species) **persecutae** (having pursued) **ex proximo nemore** (from a neighbouring grove) **avem regaliolum** (a king bird) **se inferentem** (entering) **Pompeianae curiae** (the Pompeian senate-house) **cum laureo ramulo** (with a laurel twig) **discerpserunt** (tore it apart) **ibidem** (on the spot).

This omen took place in the *curia* (meeting hall) attached to the Theatre of Pompey which was where the Senate was meeting on the day of Caesar's assassination, since the Senate House in the forum was being renovated. The Theatre had a grove of plane trees next to it, which is where these birds have supposedly come from. Pompey had fought against and lost to Caesar in the previous Civil War. The omen would have seemed straightforward to a Roman audience which is why Suetonius does not waste time explaining it.

The **volucres varii generis** are the senators from a variety of backgrounds and with a range of motives. The **avem regaliolum** is Caesar: his dictatorship had brought to mind monarchy for many Romans, something they were very much against. The **laureo ramulo** is a reference to the wearing of the laurel crown, a sign of power and leadership. Suetonius (*Divus Iulius* 45) says that Caesar had been awarded the unusual honour of wearing this crown at all times. **discerpserunt** refers to the murder of Caesar which was brutal – 23 wounds delivered by a crowd of Senators (*Divus Iulius* 82) - and took place in that very Senate House (**ibidem**).

10 **nocte... quietem:** night is the time for magical happenings (cf. Martial, Petronius, Pliny)

10-11 **supra nubes volitare cum love dextram iungere:** a reference to Caesar's subsequent deification. Following his death, a comet moving across the sky was interpreted by his heir, Octavian (the future emperor Augustus) as his soul ascending to the heavens and he was proclaimed a god.

11 **Calpurnia uxor:** Calpurnia was (probably) Caesar's fourth wife. They had married in 59BC and she was around 32 years old at the time of his death.

12 **imaginata est:** as in the Pliny text, this formulaic expression indicates a dream.
fastigium: the **fastigium** was the triangular gable end of a temple, but Caesar had been voted the extraordinary honour of *fastigium in domo* (a temple gable on the house). The collapse of it in Calpurnia's dream links Caesar's unparalleled power to his downfall.

- 14 ob haec simul ob...:** the parallel phrasing here shows how Caesar was giving equal weight to the omens and the ill health. Suetonius creates tension by showing him ‘delaying for a long time’ (**diu cunctatus**). Although the reader knows the final outcome of these events, by prolonging this and by emphasising Caesar’s many opportunities to avoid his fate Suetonius adds drama to a familiar episode.
- 16 Decimo Bruto adhortante:** Decimus Junius Brutus Albinus is often confused with another of the assassins, the much more famous Marcus Junius Brutus. Decimus had served with Caesar in Gaul and was one of Caesar’s heirs, being much closer to him than Marcus Brutus. He was also a prime mover in the assassination and was active in fighting Mark Antony during the ensuing civil war. According to Plutarch, Decimus encourages Caesar by saying that the senators are **frequentes...opperientes** (crowded...waiting) in order to vote him in as king of provinces outside Italy.
- 17 quinta fere hora:** this would have been around 10am.
- 18 libellum insidiarum indicem:** Plutarch goes into more detail on this, suggesting that it was a Greek teacher of philosophy named Artemidorus who wrote down the entire conspiracy and handed it to Caesar.
- 19 sinistra manu:** the left-hand side is considered ill-omened. Of course, although Caesar is **mox lecturus** (‘intending to read it soon’) he never will – a touch of dramatic irony.
- 20 pluribus hostiis caesis, cum litare non posset:** see the Source Images notes on sacrifice, auspices, and haruspicy (picture 3, pictures 5-6, and picture 4). Before a meeting, these signs had to be observed. It was common practice for unsuccessful sacrifices to be repeated until a favourable reading was obtained. Caesar is unable to obtain a favourable reading as his fate is now sealed. Suetonius implies later in his text that the awaited sacrifice is in fact Caesar himself.
- 21-22** a tricolon of ironic participles (**spreta...irridens...arguens**) emphasises Caesar’s error as he enters the Senate House, with the verb **introiit** moved to the start of the clause to emphasise the moment his fate is sealed.
- 23-24** Spurinna presumably would have been in attendance at the sacrifices, and therefore his ability to give a laden riposte needs no further explanation. The sibilance of these lines (**adessent...is venisse...eas...sed...praeterisse**), alongside the forceful brevity of the statement, adds to the sinister tone of this famous pronouncement.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Read the entire text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then reread each sentence or section, asking leading questions so that the class comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. It may be desirable to produce a written translation once the students have understood the Latin.

sed Caesari...flere (lines 1-4):

- What was indicated to Caesar? How was it indicated?
- When did this portent take place? Which animals were involved? What had Caesar done to these horses? When had he done this and where? How had he let them loose? What were they refusing to do? What else were they doing?

et immolantem...proferretur (lines 4-6):

- What was Caesar doing when the next sign was revealed? Who gave him the warning and what was his job? What was Caesar warned to beware? When would it not be delayed beyond?

pridie...discerpserunt (lines 6-9):

- When did the next omen take place? What kind of bird did it involve? What was the bird carrying? Where did the bird enter? What other creatures were involved? Where had they come from? What were they doing? What brutal act did it culminate in?

ea vero...patuerunt (lines 9-13):

- When did the next set of signs take place? When it says 'he seemed to himself' what does it mean is happening? What kind of atmosphere is it? Where did he imagine he was? What was he doing? Which god did he dream about? What was he doing with Jupiter?
- Who else was imagining things? What did she imagine happened to the gable of the house? Who did she dream about? Where was he? What had happened to him?
- How quickly did the next omen occur? What part of the house are we focusing on? What did the doors of the bedroom do?

ob haec...commiscuit (lines 14-20):

- What does *haec* mean? What does it refer to? What else is on Caesar's mind? What did he do as a result of these things? What two things was he thinking of doing?
- Who makes an appearance? What did he do? What was he urging Caesar not to do? How many people were waiting for Caesar? Why might they have been getting restless?
- At what time did Caesar set out?
- What did he get given? What was the book about? When did he get it? What did he do with it? Where was he holding these other books? What did he intend to do with them?

dein pluribus...praeterisse (lines 20-24):

- How many victims (animals) were killed (*it might be helpful to explain that omens had to be read at the start of every state meeting*)? Why did they have to kill so many?
- What did Caesar do anyway? What did he scorn? Who did he mock? What did he accuse him of being? What was his evidence for Spurinna being a false haruspex?
- What did Spurinna say the Ides of March had done? What did he say they had not done?

Questions on Content and Style

1. (lines 1) What effect does Suetonius create by using the word **evidentibus** here?
 2. (lines 2-4) Explain the significance of the Rubicon River in the life of Caesar.
 3. (lines 4-6) How does Suetonius emphasise Spurinna's warning through his choice of vocabulary and style of writing?
 4. (lines 6-9) Explain how this omen foreshadows Caesar's death.
 5. (lines 9-13) Pick out from this sentence:
 - a) two details which create a sense of mystery
 - b) two details which create a sense of horror
 - c) two details which create a sense of drama
 6. (lines 14-20) How does Suetonius, through the structure of his writing and his choice of vocabulary, make this a particularly exciting sentence?
 7. (lines 20-24) Do you feel sympathy for Caesar in these lines as he walks to his death? Explain your opinion.
 8. How does Suetonius create tension effectively throughout the entire passage?
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Discussion

Themes: sacrifices, the work of a *haruspex*, dreams, omens

The students will need to appreciate the significance of Caesar's murder, and the basic information concerning what happened – although questions on this will not appear in the examination, except where it is linked to the content of this text.

A task which shows the 'count-down' to the murder will help students to appreciate the building tension across this passage. A timeline of the preceding few days could be drawn, and the portents annotated.

This piece is an excellent summary of most of the main types of divination explored in this topic and could be used at the end of the course for the class to have a go at putting their understanding into practice.

- Students could write from Spurinna's point of view: what has he seen and what does he advise?
 - Students could take on the role of a 'dream-reader' (*oneiromancer*) and interpret the dreams of Caesar and Calpurnia.
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General questions on the passage and theme

1. What different types of warning does Caesar receive?
 2. What can we learn about Roman superstitions and omens from this passage?
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Further Information and Reading

Suetonius refers to many incidents in the life of Caesar in this text. Here they are in chronological order with some linking background.

- 59 BC: Caesar was consul with the backing of Pompey and Crassus. Caesar's daughter Julia was married to Pompey, and Caesar himself married Calpurnia.
- 58 BC: Caesar became Governor of Gaul. He was wildly popular and successful, conquering beyond the extent of the province and even making forays into Britain. Rather than serving for the traditional one year, Caesar was originally given command for five years. When this came to an end, he was given a further five years. The Senate grew increasingly uneasy with his popularity and demanded that he disband his army and return to Rome.
- 49 BC: Caesar crossed the Rubicon at the head of his army, committing treason and beginning the civil war with Pompey.
- 9th August 48 BC: Caesar defeated Pompey decisively at the Battle of Pharsalus. He pardoned many of those who fought against him and was elected Dictator.
- April 45 BC: all remaining supporters of Pompey who refused to accept his pardon have been defeated by Caesar. He held a triumph to celebrate his military success, but many in Rome believed this to be in poor taste as those he defeated were Romans themselves.
- Between 48 BC and 44 BC: he was given an increasing number of extraordinary honours, including the honour of wearing a laurel crown and the honour of the *fastigium in domo*.
- Early 44 BC: Caesar had the Senate House rebuilt causing meetings to be temporarily moved to the Curia of Pompey.
- February 44BC: Caesar was elected 'Dictator in Perpetuity'.
- March 15th 44BC: the assassination of Caesar at a meeting of the Senate in the Curia of Pompey.

The Romans counted the days of each month preceding three key dates. The 1st day of the month was the Kalends. The Nones fell on the 7th day if the month had 31 days in it, and on the 5th for the other months. The Ides fell on the 15th if the month had 31 days in it, and on the 13th for the other months.

Plutarch *Life of Caesar* 63-65 has additional evidence which adds extra colour to this version.

Robert Graves (revised with intro. and notes by J.B. Rives), Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* (London: Penguin, 1957; rev. 2007)