Caligula and the Bludgeoned Priest

In a much discussed passage, Suetonius tells the story of when the emperor Caligula was pretending to perform the job of a priest’s assistant (popa), who during a religious ceremony would normally bludgeon the animal on the head with his sacrificial axe, so that the higher priest (cultrarius) may then slit its throat; in this case, however, the emperor felled the priest instead (Calig. 32.3). In order to appreciate the anecdote in its full context within the biography, more of the passage should be quoted (32.1-3):¹

In diversions too, when engaged in play and banquets, he displayed the same cruel deeds and words... When a gladiator who was still in training was sparring with him using wooden swords, and had deliberately fallen, he stabbed him with an iron dagger, and ran around in the manner of winners with a trophy. When a sacrificial animal had been led to the altars, he dressed himself in the attire of a priest's assistant and, raising his axe in the air, slayed the priest. In a glorious feast, when he suddenly burst into laughter, and the consuls sitting next to him enquired what was giving him his winning smile, he said: ‘What, if not the fact that, with one nod from me, each of your throats can be instantly cut?’

¹ I use the texts of Ihm 1908 for Suetonius and Boissevain 1898 for Dio, with my own translations. In this passage, blandé is usually taken as ‘politely’ with quaerentibus (e.g. Rolfe 1913, 455; Edwards 2000, 153; Graves 32007, 163; cf. Hurley 2011, 179), but it makes better sense as ‘pleasantly’ or ‘attractively’ (OLD s.v. blandus 1) with rideret; cf. Petron. Sat. 127.1.
The biographer here demonstrates his customary ability to group the items of his rubrics in ascending order of effect, moving from gladiator to priest to consuls, and culminating in a pithy saying.² Woods has recently speculated that the story about the priest never happened, and that Suétionius’ source merely invented it based on a misunderstanding of a different episode, which is reported by Dio (59.22.3-4):³

κυβεύων δὲ ποτε, καὶ μαθὼν ὅτι οὐκ εἶ ὁ ἄργυριον, ἦτησε τε τὰς τῶν Γαλατῶν ἀπογραφὰς, καὶ ἐξ αὐτῶν τὸς πλουσιώτατος θανατωθῆναι κελεύσας ἐπανῆλθε τε πρὸς τοὺς συγκυβευτὰς καὶ ἔφη ὅτι Ὕμεις περὶ ὀλίγων δραχμῶν ἀγωνίζεσθε, ἐγὼ δὲ ἐς μυρίας καὶ πεντακισχιλίας μυριάδας ἤθροισα. καὶ οὗτοι μὲν ἐν οὐδενὶ λόγῳ ἀπώλοντο· ἀμέλει εἷς τις αὐτῶν Ἰούλιος Σακερδὼς ἄλλως μὲν εὐ χρημάτων ἤκων, οὔ μέντοι καὶ ὑπερπλουτῶν ὥστε καὶ ἐπιβουλεύθηναι δι’ αὐτά, ὡμιός ἐξ ἐπωνυμίας ἀπεσφάγη· οὕτως ἀκρίτως πάντα ἐγίγνετο.

When he was playing dice once, and realized that he had no money, he demanded the census-list of Gauls, and, after ordering the wealthiest of them to be executed, returned to his fellow players, saying: ‘You compete for a few drachmas, while I have taken in a hundred and fifty million.’ And these men died unnoticed; indeed one of them, Julius Sacerdos, who had generally decent funds, but not so abundant as to draw the attention of schemers for it, had his throat cut due to his similar name. This was how senselessly everything happened.

According to Woods, the source followed by Suétionius mistook the victim’s name Sacerdos, which means ‘priest’, for an actual priest, and embellished the entire anecdote to fit the bill. Woods does not find the story in Suétionius well-suited to the rubrics of ludus and epulae, and “the realisation that the

² See Hurley 1993, 128 (ad loc.); cf. Brandão 2009, 223 for this section as part of a larger crescendo (gradatio) in the Life. On this technique in Suétionius, see e.g. Steidle 1951, 56-58; Mouchóvá 1968, 79-104; Cizek 1977, 118-134; Gasou 1984, 697-700; Pausch 2004, 294-301; for the biographer’s use of characterizing sayings, Damon 2014.