NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN SUETONIUS AND
THE HISTORIA AUGUSTA: POWER, POSTURE AND
PROXEMICS

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ABSTRACT

One of the ways in which Suetonius and the Augustan History author differ in their portrayals of
the power-holders and power-seekers they wrote about is in how power, position, status and
prestige were communicated non-verbally. An initial count of non-verbal signifiers across fourteen
categories shows Suetonius filling his narrative with considerably more such material than the
HISTORIA AUGUSTA does. This finding includes the categories of proxemics (the spatial relationship
of the bodies of power-holders to other people), to significant locations, and to bodily posture.
Depending on the situation, sitting or standing, relaxation or rigidity, closeness or distance, few
or many companions can be marks of inferiority or superiority, weakness or strength, intimacy
or control, compliance or resistance. The greater range and variety of such material in Suetonius
mean that one gets from him a fuller sense of how individuals differ in their efforts to influence
and impress others.

Suetonius and the author of the HISTORIA AUGUSTA (henceforth simply HA)
wrote about men who wielded supreme power in the Roman world. These
men themselves, because of their different characters, circumstances and
epochs, wielded that power in different ways, and the authors themselves
bring different perceptions and understandings of power to their biographical
task. How power is sought, wielded and preserved has, of course, been
extensively studied, but the focus here is on some of the non-verbal means
by which people in the imperial biographies sought to control, persuade,
influence, deceive and impress others, to display and protect their power,
dominance and status. References to some forms of non-verbally
communicating power, such as architecture and public works, and participation
in some forms of ritual and ceremony, such as funerals, thanksgivings,
sacrifices, temple closure and troop inspections, have been excluded. And as
this article’s subtitle indicates, it is the messages conveyed by posture and
proxemics (the study of the spatial relationships and positions of people and
significant objects, how close and how oriented people are to each other,
whether all are on the same plane) that are studied most closely.
The use of the phrase ‘non-verbal communication’ in the title is an attempt to define more narrowly a range of non-verbal activity that is so wide that it would involve consideration of almost everything the characters mentioned in the lives do, as distinct from say. Non-verbal communication is a guide to what a person wishes, thinks, feels, fears. It includes both intentional and unintentional messages, either of which can be received accurately or erroneously, and solitary behaviour, where there is only an imaginary observer. It includes information that is enduring, typical of a person’s appearance, character and habits, or ephemeral, activity dependent on a person’s age, mood or situation. Non-verbal signifiers can indicate not only mental states, but the nature of relationships. In this article, non-verbal communication focuses on the movements, modifications and positions of the body, but first counts references to a wider array of visual signs, including standards, statues and paintings. It is useful to get an idea of how sensitive each author is to non-verbal signifiers in general, judged by the frequency with which they are mentioned in the texts. To make preliminary comparison easier, only about two-thirds of the HA text was used, so that its word total matched that of Suetonius’ twelve Caesars, viz., 68,810 words. Fourteen categories of non-verbal communication were used, viz., paralinguistics, silence, gesture, facial expression, autonomic nervous system responses (e.g. blush, pale), posture, gait, immobility, haptics (non-aggressive body contact), aggressive touching, bestowal of significant objects (e.g. gift, military decoration), proxemics, attire, and inanimate visual signs (e.g. head of rival on a spear). While the value of

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1 See B. Korte, Body Language in Literature (Toronto 1997).
2 The HA totals 107,618 words. Computer-counted totals for the individual lives can be found in J. Marriot, 'The authorship of the Historia Augusta: two computer studies', JRS 69 (1979) 65-77, at 75. Suetonius was manually counted. The HA lives used were those of Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Pertinax, Didius Julianus, Septimius Severus, Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus, Caracalla, Opellius Macrinus, the two Maximini, the three Gordiani, Maximus and Balbinus, the two Gallieni, Claudius, Aurelian, Tacitus and Carus, Carinus and Numerian, plus the first 272 words of Verus (part of the first subsample) and the first 217 words of the two Valeriani (part of the second subsample). The HA sample was divided into two 34,405 word samples to see if the greater fictional content of the later lives affected non-verbal reportage. The subtotals were close to each other: 257 to 272. The Suetonius sample was also divided into two, with the break coming at Cal. 20. Here there was a marked difference, with the later lives scoring 464 to the earlier lives’ 333, 58% to 42%. Why this should be so is a mystery. The nature of his written sources may be part of the answer and if Suetonius was relying more on oral sources for the later lives, he may unconsciously have incorporated some of the body language, including mimicry, of his informants into his narrative.
3 For discussion of what is involved in these categories and the messages they may convey, see F. Poyatos, New Perspectives in Nonverbal Communication (Oxford 1983); R. F. Newbold,
such quantification is limited, Suetonius’ total of 797 for the fourteen categories to the HA’s 529 does suggest an author more interested in or alert to non-verbal messages. Suetonius scored 100 references in the Posture category to the HA’s 41 (55 in the work as a whole), and 125 in Proxemics to the HA’s 52 (83 in the whole work). In the qualitative discussion of Posture and Proxemics that follows, illustrations from the part of the HA not included in the sample have also been used. The HA is alert to the significance of Posture, and Proxemics, but far less so than Suetonius.

Power can be demonstrated in distanced or immediate ways. Exiling a rival or sending gifts to a foreign ruler is less immediate than the statement made by appearing in finery and with a large entourage. A great deal of what people do in the imperial biographies implies other people nearby, as spectators to observe, say, splendid attire, or they are more directly involved in some interaction. Besides Proxemics, the categories of Haptics, Facial Expression, Significant Bestowal and Aggressive Contact also suggest proximity, not to mention conversation (almost any verbal utterance implies an audience) and gestures such as pointing and waving. It is this spatial manifestation of power, dominance and status that we are chiefly concerned with. But Posture is frequently governed by the presence of other people (Suetonius has Posture and Proxemics information in the same incident 42 times, the HA 10 times) and for that reason becomes an area of particular interest. Power has been distinguished from dominance and status as the

5 The coincidence of Posture and Proxemics signifiers complicates separate treatment of these two categories. Some arbitrary separation and repetition is unavoidable, but if, say, the Posture signifier appears more significant in a notice than the Proxemic one, it is discussed in the Posture paragraphs. Posture and Proxemics are likely to occur together because they are two of the non-verbal means whereby inequalities of status are manifested. Others include eye contact, facial expression, touching, formality of demeanour. Higher status individuals tend to have a more relaxed posture and feel free to move closer than do those of lower status.
potential to influence, control, coerce or reward others, a potential which derives from greater physical or military strength, or resources and expertise.6 A gentle giant, benevolent despot or unassuming professor can have power but not flaunt it. Dominance can be defined either as a personality characteristic, the drive to influence others, or a group characteristic, one’s position in a dyad, group or society that entitles greater access to food, attention, reproduction, prestige objects (furniture, vehicles, clothing), spacious habitats. Position in the pecking-order is flaunted by overt or dramatic displays of authority, toughness, violence, teasing, boasting, cruel jokes etc., and the conviction can grow that “I am stronger, therefore I deserve more.” Status is declared by attire, occupation, education, rank, age, physical attractiveness, race, and gender, and is more diffuse in its influence. It seems to be much the same as power and dominance, but it may be about the appearance rather than the substance of power, such as that of titular heads of countries or consuls under the Principate. In practice, it is difficult to always maintain these distinctions. A good deal of human behaviour does not seek immediately or directly to reward or coerce, but simply to impress and to remind others of a superiority that makes future control easier and compliance more likely. When a ruler in a dominance-display offers a hand or foot to be kissed, the subject has no option but to kiss the proffered member and feel coerced to show the required homage or obeisance. However, when an instance of non-verbal communication seems to be primarily about such displays, ‘dominance’ rather than ‘power’ will be used.

Some of the references to Posture in Suetonius are casual, mundane, secondary details, such as someone riding a horse, sitting in judgement or reclining at table. When Claudius arranged extra fights in the arena during the lunch interval, he used his power to gratify his blood-lust, but the fact that he watched such contests while sitting is hardly of moment (Cl. 34.2). Likewise, that he should absent-mindedly wonder where the executed Messalina was as he reclined for dinner (Cl. 39.1). These details may, however, lend vividness to a scene,7 and they often bear on issues of status, the showing of decorum and function, as when Augustus sits on a curule chair in front of the temple.

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7 For what follows, see Ellyson & Dovidio (note 5) 7-8.

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[Note on Suetonius: Sometimes Suetonius seems to insert Posture and Proxemic details solely for this purpose, as when he describes Nero setting out to subdue rebellion in 68. Nero took up the fasces and left the dining-room after a banquet, ‘leaning on the shoulders of his comrades’ (Ner. 43.2). What other purpose does this detail serve? Similarly, when we are told that Caesar received his assassins sitting and vainly tried to rise after Casca struck the first blow (Jul. 82.1-2). At least these passages...]

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of Jupiter before resigning his second consulship on the 1st of January (Aug. 26.3).

Or it is a person’s presence and company that are more important, as when we learn that Claudius sat in the senate for important sessions, between the consuls or with the tribunes (Cl. 23.2; cf. 25.4), or that Augustus moved and sat in a part of a theatre that appeared most likely to collapse, and thus calmed panicky spectators (Aug. 43.5). Sitting near magistrates as they heard cases enabled Tiberius to intervene quickly if he thought cases were being influenced by gratia (Tib. 33). Although he said absolutely nothing, Augustus’ sitting on benches at the trial of his friend Nonius Asprenas was the non-verbal exercise of his own gratia (Aug. 43.2). When Tiberius returned to Rome in AD 9, recognition was due for his considerable achievements in Pannonia. In part this took the form of Tiberius mounting a platform in the Saepta, around which the senate stood, and sitting next to Augustus, flanked by the consuls, a clearly designated successor (Tib. 17.2).

Context is important. It was by sitting on the ground to eat that Tiberius won the respect of his troops on campaign (Tib. 18.2). Posture, which includes body-position during locomotion (standing in a chariot, riding on a horse, lying in a litter, going on foot) and the change from one body-position to another, is an effective means of conveying status and (dis)respect, of attitude and disposition. Prior to 41, the equestrian order rose for Claudius when he came to the spectacles (Cl. 6.1) and Tiberius showed commendable civilitas when he rose in the presence of the consuls (Tib. 31.2; similarly, Claudius, Cl. 12.2). Likewise sensitive to the role of posture in cultivating relationships and preserving the image of a citizen-ruler dignity, Augustus, it seems, encouraged senators to remain seated when he greeted them in the curia and when he left (Aug. 53.3). To spare knights who were challenged at the equestrian reviews the public humiliation of having to dismount, Augustus forbade the practice. Knights who were too old or decrepit to ride a horse he allowed to come on foot to answer their names (Aug. 38.3).

Still on the issue of respect and disrespect, one of Suetonius’ reasons for including episodes involving Posture and Proxemics is to compare rulers. Caesar, when dictator, gave grave offence when he did not rise to meet the whole senate as it approached to confer great honours upon him. The seriousness of this failure is suggested not only by controversy whether Caesar

times one wonders who the eyewitness(es) could have been. It was probably Agrippa when the astrologer Theogenes, casting Augustus’ horoscope and discerning his great future, supposedly jumped up and displayed reverence in some way with his body (‘adoravit’, Aug. 94.12).

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had intended to rise, but was pulled down by Balbus, or glared at Trebatius when Trebatius urged him to rise. Unlike Augustus and Tiberius, Caesar wanted to exhibit his dominance and get postural recognition for it. It was also underlined by Caesar’s recent and prolonged fury at a tribune who failed to rise when Caesar rode past in triumphal procession (Jul. 78.1-2). In further contrast, to illustrate Vespasian’s patience under provocation, Suetonius tells of the exiled Cynic philosopher Demetrius failing to acknowledge Vespasian’s presence or rise for him, instead barking out something unintelligible. Vespasian merely called him a dog (Ves.13). An inappropriate readiness to rise did not please Augustus. He took strong exception to a theatre audience who rose as one to applaud his prepubescent grandsons.\(^8\) *Civiliter*, Augustus, as consul, went on foot in Italian towns. Otherwise, he rode in a litter (Aug. 53.2). As a mark of respect for his late brother, Tiberius walked beside the corpse all the way to Rome (Tib. 7.3). It was a particular honour for Crassus Frugi that he rode at Claudius’ British triumph while the rest went on foot (Cl. 17.3). Conversely, Caligula allowed senators to run for miles in togas beside his chariot (Cal. 26.2). Control over the posture of others took rather different forms when military defaulters were made to stand all day before Augustus’ tent (Aug. 24.2) and senators were required to make offerings to the deity in whose temple they were meeting before sitting down (Aug. 35.2), a bid to enhance the significance of senatorial meetings.

Kneeling or lying before someone is a clear statement and recognition of unequal power and prestige, but intended and received messages vary with the situation. L. Lucullus, intimidated by Caesar’s threat to prosecute him, swallowed enough pride to fall at Caesar’s knees in supplication and beg him to desist (‘ad genua’, Jul. 20.4). When an ex-consul, anxious to apologise, tried, literally, ‘to beseech through the knees’ (‘per genua orare’, Tib. 27), Tiberius shrank back so vigorously that he fell over.\(^9\) After the murder of Caligula, Claudius, in fear of his life, fell ‘ad genua’ of the soldier who found him behind a curtain (Cl. 10.2). But when, as part of celebrating

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\(^8\) *Aug*. 56.2. It was bad enough that a theatre audience should refer the line ‘O dominum sequum et bonum’ to him and applaud, worse that they should leap to their feet. He stopped this inappropriate adulation ‘manu vultuque’ and next day issued a stern edict (*Aug*. 53.1). On standing as a mark of respect, see G. Aldrette, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore 1999) 106-07.

\(^9\) Suetonius cites this incident as an illustration of Tiberius’ horror of *adulatio*. Tacitus tells the story somewhat differently, when Haterius Agrippa, anxious to apologise for some frank speaking in the senate, fell on his knees before Tiberius and accidentally knocked him over (*Ann*. 1.13). Tiberius must have been appalled too when senators cast themselves ‘ad genua’ to beg him to take the imperial power (Tib. 24.1).
a triumph in AD 12 for his victories in Germany, Tiberius fell at the knees of
the master of ceremonies, Augustus, this was simply an act of homage (Tib. 20). And when Augustus, toga removed and chest bared, knelt to beg the
people not to continue to ask him to become dictator, this was partly a rhetorical
device to increase the force of his appeal (Aug. 52). Posture and Proxemics
figure prominently (and inevitably) in Suetonius’ detailed account of how
Nero maximised the propaganda value of Tuirdates’ coming to Rome to be
crowned king of Armenia. Arranging the praetorians in full armour around
the temples in the Forum, he sat on the rostra in a curule chair, dressed as a
triumphing general and in the midst of military standards. Tuirdates had to
come up from a lower level along a ramp. When he fell ‘ad genua’, Nero
lifted him up with his right hand and kissed him. But he knelt again to receive
the crown (‘precanti’, and cf. Dio 63.2.4). He was then taken to the theatre
of Pompey, where having once again adopted the pose of suppliant, he took
a seat on Nero’s right (Ner. 13.1-2).

Ever ready to provide physical details about his subjects, Suetonius notes
that Claudius achieved auctoritas and dignitas when he stood, sat and, in
particular, lay down, but his weak knees gave him a ridiculous, tottering gait
when he walked. Incidents involving posture may be narrated primarily to
illustrate character or emotion, but they can also show power being exercised
in unusual or paradoxical ways. Perhaps from a lingering sense of duty and
civilitas, but certainly, according to Suetonius, from a desire to conceal the
severity of his last illness, Tiberius, long practised in deception, insisted on
standing in the middle of the dining-room, lictor by his side, to bid guests
farewell (Tib. 72.3). During his last illness, Vespasian performed tasks such
as receiving embassies while lying in bed, and just before the end struggled
to his feet, saying that an emperor ought to die standing, and died in the arms
of those supporting him. Although too ill to lead on foot the procession to
open the games he had vowed, Augustus showed his sense of commitment
by being carried in a litter (Aug. 44.5). It was a mark of his conscientiousness
that, when ill, he heard legal cases from a litter placed on the tribunal or even
reclining at home (Aug. 33.1).

Likewise in the HA, some references to Posture are incidental, such as
Carus lying in a tent because of illness (Carus 8.3), and secondary to the

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10 Cl. 30. Cf. Augustus’ wish that Claudius would find someone whose motus, habitus and
incessus he could imitate (Cl. 4.5), and Cic. Off. 1.35-36 and Sen. Epp. 66.5 on the importance
of gait, posture, facial expression, gesture and body-movement generally for outering one’s
inner excellence.

11 Ves. 24. Cf. Tiberius’ final failure to rise from his bed (Tib. 73.2).
presence of others, such as Pius sitting by Marcus when he and five other *seviri equitum Romanorum* presided over their games (*MA* 6.3). Being able to maintain an upright posture is one mark of ability to exercise power. Reminiscent of the behaviour of Tiberius and Vespasian in the paragraph above, Pius used splints to help him walk upright in old age (*AP* 13.1). He was not too decrepit to do his job. The unfitness of a would-be usurper, Camillus, to rule was shown when Alexander Severus kept walking with the troops and Camillus, starting as his companion, was reduced to sitting on a horse and then a carriage (*SA* 48.4; cf. *Trig.* 30.17, of Zenobia). Septimius, on the other hand, who had been unable to celebrate his Parthian triumph because gout prevented him standing up in a chariot (*Sep.* 16.6), was anxious to demonstrate that inability to stand did not mean impotence. Towards the end of his reign, he had to quell a challenge to his power when troops prematurely hailed Caracalla as Augustus. Having been lifted onto a platform because of his gout, he ordered the offenders to be punished. They then prostrated themselves before him, asking for clemency. Septimius touched his head with his hand and said that they now knew that the head, not the feet, ruled (*Sep.* 18.9-10). A mark of Probus’ success in restoring Roman control in Gaul was the nine German chiefs who came and lay at his feet (*Prob.* 14.2). One of the many episodes illustrating Elagabalus’ unfitness to rule involved a perverted charade where he adopted a submissive posture and, naked, presented himself for sexual penetration (*El.* 5.4).

Stories that presage tenure of power may contain details about posture. One of the indicators of a tendency to dominance is playing games in childhood that emphasise one’s prominence. Septimius, we are told, would play no other role in childhood except that of judge. Preceded by bearers of rods and axes, surrounded by an entourage of other boys, he would sit and deliver judgements (*Sep.* 1.4). The future was also presaged when the young Septimius mistakenly sat in the emperor’s chair; similarly, when the younger Maximinus, then a boy, finding Caracalla’s chariot empty, climbed into it and sat down (*Sep.* 1.9; *Max.* 30.6). When Balbinus was reported complaining that he did all the hard work while Maximus sat (‘sedisset’) taking life easy in Ravenna, he was making a figurative contrast with his own more active [12] *MB* 12.5. In the case of *Gall.* 20.3-5, the origin of the custom of military men reclining at banquets with their sword belts on, a response, allegedly, to the boy Gallienus once having stolen them when they had been taken off, the notice has more to do with Attire than Posture, as does the notice at *Trig.* 23.5. Two references to bearing, Caracalla leaning on Papinius and Cilo as he returned to the palace after the murder of Geta (*Car.* 3.2), and Aurelian leaning over Valerian to express his thanks (*Aur.* 14.1), are more like the details added to give vividness to a scene noted in discussion of Suetonius. See note 7.
posture as a general. So there are features of the HA's references to Posture that are distinctive from Suetonius' and which do not offer parallel comparisons, but, overall, the earlier writer evinces a greater awareness of the many and various messages that body-position can convey.

Issues concerning respect and disrespect, honour and dishonour, do surface, however. Respect was conveyed by Hadrian standing to receive senators at a banquet (Had. 22.4) and by the eldest Gordian never sitting in the presence of his father-in-law until he became praetor (Gor. 6.4). When they can, good emperors proceed on foot at triumphal processions (SA 57.4). Marcus honoured his son by running in the circus beside the triumphal chariot in which Commodus sat (MA 6.2). It was the failure of Maximinus’ son to imitate his father and rise to meet distinguished men that attracts the charge of superbia from the author (Max. 28.1). But Hadrian put a sinister interpretation on the readiness of his father-in-law Servianus, aged 90, to rise to meet the guards on duty at the palace (Had. 23.8). This became a ground for forcing him to suicide. The author finds it worthy of record that Gallienus should distribute a sportula to the senate from a chair (‘sedens’, Gall. 16.6). If the key point here is Gallienus’ posture of dominance rather than the distribution per se, presumably this was a disrespectful irregularity.

Just as with Posture, references to Proxemics illustrate challenges to and respect for power and status. (Would-be) assassins moving towards their illustrious targets clearly ignore status. When Galba launched his rebellion, he mounted a platform decorated in front with statues of Nero’s victims, the young son of an exiled noble at his side; denunciation of Nero and acclamation as emperor followed (Gal. 10.1). Almost comical disrespect was shown to Nero, forced to stand outside Otho’s door when he tried to negotiate over who should have Poppaea (Oth. 3.2). To remind him of his years and junior status, and to make him pay for his recent presumptuous behaviour, Domitian was made to follow reclining in a litter, while his father and brother sat in sedan chairs, when they went out (Dom. 2.1).

Being close to the right people is an obvious source of strength and may be a mark of favour. An ancestor of Tiberius banked on respect for the sacrosanct status of Vestal Virgins to enable him to celebrate an unsanctioned triumph. He installed a relative in his chariot to prevent tribunician obstruction (Tib. 2.4). However, the signs could be false. Having, Suetonius implies, decided to crucify one of his accountants, Domitian, on the day before the execution, showed him such Proxemic marks of favour as inviting him to his

cubiculum, accepting him into intimate space by sitting him on the couch next to him, sending him away in good spirits, even giving him food (Dom. 11.1). During senatorial divisions, the degree of support for the proposer of a motion could easily be told from the number of people who gathered around him. A striking demonstration of isolation and the failure of dominance occurred when Tiberius found himself standing totally alone on one such occasion (Tib. 31.1). During the heated debate on the fate of the Catilinarian conspirators, knights threatened Caesar with drawn swords so menacingly that most of his friends who sat next to him moved away, except for a few using their bodies and togas as a shield (Jul. 14.2). That Nero fled on his final day with only four companions was in sharp contrast with his usual splendid entourages (Ner. 48.1). Significant companions, like significant meetings,¹⁴ can lend legitimacy, honour and respectability to activities, confirm or enhance the status of one or both parties, but also diminish it. When Nero stepped forward to enter the lyre-playing contest at the second Neronia, praetorian prefects carried his lyre and he was accompanied by military tribunes and close friends (Ner. 21.1). That Claudius’ freedman Polybius often walked between the consuls (Cl. 28) spoke volumes, not all of it good for the consuls (or Claudius). And Suetonius finds it noteworthy that Claudius’ wife followed his chariot in a vehicle at his British triumph (Cl. 17.3).

Dominance is often advertised by a separation and distancing, by control of access and by elaborate ceremonial. This can be done by having in one’s immediate presence people such as guards or high-status persons (or even numerous low-status persons: they can form an impressive entourage and help focus attention on the splendid figure at the head or centre). Attendants help maintain dominance when distance between superior and inferior disappears into the personal, touching distance of beneficent bestowal, such as at congiari or gift-givings. Escorts can, however, betray a ruler’s fear and lack of confidence in his position. At his first lectio senatus in 28 BC, Augustus, fearing the homicidal resentment of those facing expulsion, wore a breastplate under his clothing, a sword at his side, and had ten burly senatorial friends standing around his chair. Moreover, senators could only approach him singly and after having been body-searched (Aug. 35.1-2). Particularly insecure in his early days as ruler, Claudius asked for and obtained permission to enter the senate with praetorian prefects and tribunes. He would not attend banquets except with an armed escort and soldiers assuming the duties of waiters, and only late in the reign did he excuse women, girls and boys from being body-

¹⁴ E.g., Claudius going to meet Aulus Plautius on his triumphal return from Britain (Cl. 24.3).

¹⁵ Cl. 12.1, 35.1-2. Controlling the proxemic behaviour of others may stem from a sense of
searched when they came to pay their respects. Less fearful, or more concerned to display civilitas in his early years, Tiberius always entered the curia alone. Once, when he had to be brought in by litter because of ill heath, he dismissed the bearers (Tib. 30). Nero’s flamboyant dominance sought the limelight. When not actually performing, entourages helped attract attention to him. Tiberius, in contrast, relied on withdrawal to convey dominance.

At times it may be prudent, or a mark of a trusting nature, not to distance oneself or to advertise power through escorts. A signal instance of trust and confidence occurred when Titus placed two men, whom he had learnt were seeking to depose him, near him at a gladiatorial show and handed gladiatorial swords to them to inspect. When on Rhodes, Tiberius advertised his lack of pretensions to superior status by, amongst other things, walking around without a lictor. It was a mark of Germanicus’ civilitas that he entered free and federate town ‘sine lictoribus’ (Cal. 3.2). In order to conceal his identity when he went on nocturnal rampages, Nero dispensed with his usual military escort. Having once been severely beaten, he thereafter had praetorian tribunes follow him at a discreet distance (Ner. 26.1-2). The impressive procession that the splendidly attired Caligula conducted across the Baiae boat-bridge, where he was accompanied by Parthian hostages, all

insecurity. Hence soldiers were forbidden to attend senators’ salutationes (Cl. 25.1).

15 When he travelled to Capri in 26, Tiberius ordered that no-one was allowed to approach him. Returning to the mainland in response to the Fidenae amphitheatre disaster, he prudently made amends for such inaccessibility by allowing anyone to approach him (Tib. 40). Earlier in the reign, he would not allow any senator to approach his litter for fear of more unwanted flattery (Tib. 27). This is a rather different and more admirable reason for wanting to preserve distance. Less genial and tolerant of callers than Augustus, who relished the proximate intercourse of gift exchanges at the Saturnalia and New Year (Aug. 57.1, 75), he banned such activity after 1 January (Tib 34). Introverts do it differently. It is difficult to imagine Tiberius doing what Claudius, typically undignified, did to those who approached him in public at a bad time – driving them off with his own hand (Cl. 38.2).

16 Cf. A. Wallace-Hadrill, ‘Civilis Princeps: between citizen and king’, JRS (1982) 32-48: ‘While it is true that under the Principate some emperors used ceremonial to set a gulf between themselves and their subjects, it is more striking that others used it as a ritual of condescension to represent themselves as simple citizens.’ On civilitas, distance and proximity in Suetonius, see Idem, Suetonius (London 1983) 163-65.

17 Tib. 9.1-2. He had earlier tried to convince them of the folly of their plan. More wary was the behaviour of Domitian who held on to the chains of prisoners as he examined them (Dom. 14.4), and more hysterical was the action of Caligula when, suspecting praetorian officers of plotting his overthrow, took them aside, drew his sword and said he would kill himself if they thought he deserved to die (Cal. 56.1).

18 Someone misread the signs badly when he abused Tiberius during a philosophical debate. Tiberius corrected his misapprehension by reappearing with his official entourage, arresting and sentencing him to prison (Tib. 11.1, 3).
the praetorian guard and a group of courtiers in Gallic chariots, gave rise to speculation as to just what statement about his dominance Caligula was trying to make.\textsuperscript{20}

The size and nature of entourages create political and social distance from lesser mortals, but can also create concerns about dominant individuals becoming distanced from reality and taking scorn for society's constraints to extremes. While Rome was a society comfortable with the notion that entourage size should be an indicator of status, the nature of Nero's entries into Italian cities after the tour of Greece, followed by his mock-triumphal entry into Rome, when his clique took the role of soldiers, was a worrying sign.\textsuperscript{21} Nor was it reassuring for his future as a ruler that a few months later, in response to rebellion in Gaul, one of his first campaign measures was to make the concubines who were to accompany him look like Amazons (\textit{Ner.} 44.1). Suetonius mentions but does not vouch for ('traditur') a report that Nero made every journey accompanied by a thousand carriages, silver-shod mules, and extravagantly attired muleteers and horsemen (\textit{Ner.} 30.3). Even if this is hostile exaggeration, it suggests that the size and nature of Nero's entourages were becoming a matter for concern.

Suetonius' keen interest in the spectacles includes numerous references to how and whence and with whom rulers and their families viewed the games, and where lesser beings sat, or were made to sit. Insofar as the arena, theatre and circus were microcosms of Roman society, interest in proxemic behaviour there was natural. Throughout gladiatorial shows Domitian would watch with a microcephalic boy, who stood at his feet and with whom he held sometimes weighty conversations (\textit{Dom.} 4.2). This could have been the indulgence of a quirky fascination or a calculated and public snub to anyone who thought they were better suited to be an imperial counselor. Suetonius' way of indicating the special status of the Neronia, presided over by consuls rather than by praetors, is to note that they sat in the praetors' normal seats (\textit{Ner.} 12.3). Amongst Caligula's sins was that he encouraged commoners to occupy the seats of knights and thus start fights (\textit{Cal.} 26.4). Augustus put considerable effort into demarcating and encouraging respect for status\textsuperscript{22} in public stadiums and he made sure audiences could see that he

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Cal.} 19.1-3. When Caligula stood by a statue of Jupiter and asked the actor Apelles who was greater, Apelles was flogged for hesitating. Suetonius gives this as one of Caligula's 'jokes'.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ner.} 25.1-3. It is just at this point that Suetonius mentions another signal failure of Nero to maintain a healthy relationship, and therefore distance, with his subjects. In order to save his voice, Nero never spoke to his troops except through another.

\textsuperscript{22} Concerned about preserving his own status, he barred Claudius viewing games from the
shared their enthusiasm for the shows (Aug. 44.1-3; 45.1). Sensitive to the sting of reduced status, he softened the blow of forced resignation from the senate by allowing ex-senators to retain the privilege of viewing from the orchestra, and made a similar concession for knights who had fallen on hard times (Aug. 35.2; 40.1). Claudius likewise both regulated seating and showed some flexibility, allowing German envoys to move to the orchestra and claim equal status with Parthian envoys (Cl. 21.3; 25.4). Stadiums were places where dramatic proxemic and other gestures could be made, such as Augustus trying to encourage marriage and procreation by having Germanicus' children in his own and Germanicus' lap, and manu vultuque significans' that Germanicus was setting a desirable example.  

Other references to Proxemics in Suetonius have more to do with vivid narrative details, as if from eye-witnesses, that can also illustrate the absence (at least temporary) rather than the assertion of power, such as Caesar standing in the path of fleeing troops and trying to turn them about (Jul. 62), Augustus' dispensator taking refuge behind his master when a wild boar charged (Aug. 67.1), the soldier who fell on his sword at Otho's feet because no-one would believe his bad news (Oth. 10.1), and Galba almost being wounded by the spear of a praetorian guard pushed forward by the throng (Gal. 18.1). Titus' close relationship with Britannicus led to two incidents which were, to say the least, interesting, and one of them bore on Titus' destiny. A physiognomist who examined Britannicus asserted he would never rule, but that Titus, who happened to be standing nearby, definitely would. Titus was reclining beside his friend when Britannicus took the fatal poison. Titus took a sip and became very ill (Tit. 2).  

As with Posture, a lesser number of Proxemic references helps account for a less varied array of incidents and concerns in the HA sample. There is not as much interest in stadium-seating and, apart from Valerian in the baths
(Aur. 13.1), Severus Alexander, Gordian, Tacitus and Probus mounting tribunals\textsuperscript{24} and the gouty Septimius being lifted up onto one (Sep. 18.9), there is less mention of presence in or on sites of power like platforms and temples. As an example of the proximity of significant others, the author tells of eight office-holders, supplying their names (largely unknown) and titles, who sit on the right and left of Valerian in the baths and thus lend lustre to the occasion. When the youngest Gordian mounted a tribunal to complain to the troops of Philip the Arab's arrogation of power, he tried to reassert his dominance with a kinsman standing next to him as his praetorian prefect (Gor. 30.1). Mention has been made under Posture of Marcus running beside the triumphal car of Commodus in 177. In contrast, in 180, Commodus led the triumph with his debauched companion Saoterus sitting in his chariot, whom he repeatedly and openly turned around (proxemic orientation) to kiss (Com. 3.6). Emperors can flaunt their power and advertise their indifference to the sensitivities of others by having in their company people whose presence was bound to give gratuitous offence. Or they can use their proximity to men of high status to challenge their sense of shame by, for example, asking obscene and intimate questions.\textsuperscript{25}

The assertion of dominance by denial of proximity is illustrated when Maximinus allowed no noble near him, and soldiers barred access to their acclaimed emperor, Titus (Max. 9.6; 11.2). Carinus, disrespectfully and discreditably, never went to meet prefects or consuls (Carus 17.2). Or else, proximity to the emperor was regulated, so that at sacrifices no-one could come near Hadrian holding sacrificial knives (Had. 13.2). In a section detailing Verus' relative lack of distinction before becoming co-emperor, one of the indicators was that, when travelling, he rode with a praetorian prefect, not Pius (Ver. 3.5). When Septimius was a legate to the proconsul of Africa, there occurred an episode that marks the trend for powerholders to become more remote. A commoner from Septimius' municipium embraced him as an old friend, although lictors with fasces were preceding him (unwelcome Haptics). Septimius had the man clubbed and issued a proclamation that henceforth no plebeian was to initiate embrace with a legate without good reason. To help prevent such incidents, legates no longer went on foot but rode in a vehicle (Sep. 2.6-7). A rather different and, in the event, salutary, rejection of proximity occurred when would-be assassins failed to persuade Clodius Albinus to go with them away from those who might overhear their allegedly important message from Septimius. Albinus' suspicions were

\textsuperscript{24} SA 53.4; 60.7; Gor. 30.1; Tac. 7.2; Prob. 10.5.

\textsuperscript{25} El. 11.2; 12.4; cf. 10.7. Magicians were a regular part of Elagabalus' entourage (El. 8.2).
confirmed when they confessed under torture (CA 8.1-4). Severus Alexander
did restrict some access to himself and to his wife and mother for good
reasons but, ideally civilis, he never ordered anyone to be removed away
from his side, but cultivated accessibility and proximity.26 A proxemic
reference echoing and contrasting with Suetonius, his notice of the freedman
Polybius walking between the consuls, is Hadrian seeing one of his slaves
walking between two senators and sending someone to hit him and prevent
him absorbing some of their status (Had. 21.3).

Aggressive approaches include a slave rushing at Hadrian with a sword
(Had. 12.5), a would-be assassin charging Commodus (Com. 4.3), Commodus
pushing his praetorian prefect fully clad into a bathing-pool,27 and people
blocking the path of Didius Julianus from the curia to the Capitol (DJ 4.6).
Otherwise, it is a picture of people approaching each other more or less
amicably and respectfully, such as barbarian chiefs prostrating themselves
before Probus,28 emperors being raised up and acclaimed by troops (Gor.
8.5; MB 14.7) and Balbinus stretching forth his hands in appealing to various
people (MB 9.3). Without the gesture, Balbinus’ approach would be a mark
of dominance. The author attributes to Elagabalus’ mother ridiculous
(‘ridicula’) decrees about appropriate clothing and modes of transport, and
about precedence, such as whom one might approach for a kiss (El. 4.3).
There are several references to an emperor in the midst of soldiers, guards
and senators, and these can attest his popularity.29 Gallienus’ decennial
celebrations provide a major display of precedence, where he headed a
splendidly and variously attired entourage of senators, knights, priests, soldiers,
entertainers, women, slaves and men dressed as foreigners (Gall. 8).

To properly explore the way in which Attire, Facial Expression, Haptics,
Visual Signs, Aggressive Contact and all the other categories of non-verbal
communication express proximate power in our authors would be a huge
task.30 There are some fascinating notices here, such as Caligula practicing
intimidatory facial expressions in a mirror, and Caracalla’s facial expression,
for various possible reasons, becoming fiercer with age (Cal. 50.1; Cara.

26 SA 20.1; 25.10; 35.3; 47.2; 51.5.
27 Com. 11.3, in the presence of the prefect’s staff. At times it was better not to have an
entourage.
28 Prob. 14.2. Cf. Had. 8.11; Max. 3.3; Sep. 18.10; Aur. 14.1.
29 Sep. 6.2; 6.11; 7.4; Cara. 2.9; 7.1; SA 53.4, 57.4, 59.1. Cf. SA 51.4, when Alexander is able
to protect Ulpian from angry soldiers by extending his purple robe to cover him.
30 For a study of how power is portrayed on coins and reliefs by posture, proxemics, gesture
and gaze, see R. Brilliant, ‘Gesture and rank in Roman art’, Memoirs of the Connecticut
Academy 14 (1963) 76-84, 90-94.

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2.1). For Augustus, a tranquil, serene demeanour worked better. It undid the resolve of an assassin who approached him (Aug. 79.1). Domitian believed a becomingly modest expression helped him (Dom. 18.1). Ways of displaying menace or superior strength are numerous, such as meaningfully tapping a sword at one’s side (a centurion, Aug. 26.1), wearing a dagger around the neck (Gal. 11), or humiliating by obscene gesture (Cal. 56.2). Appearing on stage dressed as a tragic character, or sitting in the theatre dressed as a woman (Com. 13.4) were ways of telling large sections of the public their opinion did not matter to superior beings. Reports of people who evince marks of respect, exasperation or fear also attest the dominance of superiors. The intimidating behaviour practiced by Maximinus and the prospect of his return to Rome caused trembling and fearful faces for Maximus and Balbinus (MB 1.2). The clues available to a physiognomist as to how a person would exercise power, the way tenure of power itself alters how a person non-verbally communicates as adulation and paranoia do their corrosive work, the cultivation and attainment of speaking skills, a path to power that requires careful use of body and a matter of considerable interest for Suetonius (e.g., Jul. 33; Tib. 6.4), are all aspects that could be further explored if space allowed. One aspect, Haptics, because it is the logical end of Proxemics, and because Haptics and Proxemic references often coincide, will be briefly discussed.

Touching occurs within the sphere of intimate, personal distance that stretches from skin contact to arm’s length, where vocalisation is low, whispered or redundant. It can be an effective reminder of superiority, as when Caligula ogled guests’ wives as they passed his couch and lifted up the faces of the shy (Cal. 36.2), or at least a claim to equality. Inferiors should not presume to initiate touch, as Septimius forcefully reminded his fellow-townsmen. When his father’s concubine moved to kiss him on the face, Domitian maintained his personal space and proffered his hand (Dom. 12.3). When women members of his consilium kissed Gallienus’ hand, they acknowledged his dominance, which he then underlined by presenting them with gold pieces (Gall. 16.6). It was something of an achievement that Maximinus never came close enough to Elagabalus to take his hand (Max. 5.1). As emperor he forbade anyone to kiss his feet, unlike his son who at

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31 It is thus the space for Significant Bestowal in person and is more proximate than social distance, one to three metres, and public distance, three to seven metres or more, where the voice is raised and language becomes more formal. It is the natural distance one tends to keep from a public figure or figures performing a public function. See E. Hall, The Hidden Dimension (New York 1959) 116-25, for these (culturally variable) spheres.
salutationes haughtily proffered his hand, and even allowed his knees and feet to be kissed (Max. 28.7). Being kissed by the emperor, the kiss of favour, was devalued when bestowed on low-born favourites in public. Caligula was hated for requiring of having his foot kissed. The significance of kissing depends on who, whom, where and when. Kissing may be an attempt to win influence and popularity (Cl. 26.3; Vit. 7.3), part of the ritual of welcome and farewell (Oth. 6.2; 10.2), a sign of lust (Galb. 22), or, like embracing and stroking, a simple gesture of affection. It may be a way of attracting attention or disregarding public opinion. Paternal affection combined with the sending of messages about the future of the dynasty when Claudius held and embraced Britannicus (Cl. 27.2; 43). People who successfully approached an emperor for his healing touch were advertisements for his power (Had. 25.1-4).

To conclude: non-verbal signifiers can be indicators of transient mental states, of enduring character illustrators, and of the nature of relationships and interactions. They can dramatise a scene. One gets a better sense from Suetonius than from the HA of how individuals differ in their desires and tendencies to control and impress others. Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian provide strongly contrasted approaches. The first two, in very different ways, minimised and concealed their dominance at times. In the HA, Commodus combined Caligula’s urge to humiliate with Nero’s exhibitionism, while Severus Alexander sought to imitate Augustus. The civilitas of his model, Augustus, that Hadrian sought to advertise was undercut by a consuming drive to assert his superiority in any encounter. Depending on the situation, sitting or standing, relaxation or rigidity, closeness or distance, few or many companions, can be marks of inferiority or superiority, weakness or strength, intimacy or control, compliance or resistance. Suetonius’ greater interest in non-verbal signifiers may derive from his faith in physiognomics (whatever the reasons for that) or because ‘The recognition of power and dominance cues will be high for individuals who value power and dominance: in these cases it truly does take one to know one.’

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32 Dio 59.27.1; 29.5. Cf. Cal. 55.1 and Ner. 28.2 (kissing favourites in public), Ner. 37.3 (withholding the kiss of favour from the élite), and Com. 10.8 (deliberately mocking and debasing the practice).


34 Ellyson & Dovidio (note 5) 167.
Suetonius had a high drive for dominance, however. But a man who served emperors needed to be alert to unspoken signals of mood and purpose in the powerful, and could become particularly fond of norms being observed and critical of them being violated.\footnote{Especially when dealing with so mercurial a person as Hadrian. Cf. Wallace-Hadrill (note 17, 1983) 102: ‘Hierarchy is a habit of thought for Suetonius’, and Ellyson & Dovidio (note 5) 179, on the survival-value of alertness to non-verbal cues for those down the pecking-order.}
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