
Women in antiquity

New assessments

Edited by Richard Hawley and
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Male power and legitimacy through women: the *domus Augusta* under the Julio-Claudians

Mireille Corbier

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL IMAGE OF AUGUSTUS' FAMILY

A paterfamilias and a *princeps* in search of an heir and successor

Augustus' family endured for six generations – that is, well over a century counting from the murder of Caesar in 44 BC to the suicide of Nero in AD 68. I do not pretend to compete with the author of the famous novel *I Claudius*. My intention is to analyse how a new family unit, different in many respects from the traditional patrilinear group – the *gens* – that was the traditional structure of the Roman family, was constructed, reproduced and continued, and particularly to examine why and how women were involved in the transmission of legitimacy.

From c. AD 15–20, there is evidence¹ that the princely status of this new unit was officially recognised in the phrase *domus Augusta* ('Augustan House'), while Tacitean usage invites us to call it the *domus Caesarum* ('The House of the Caesars'). The House of the Caesars was an original and intentional construction (Corbier 1994a).

The legacy Augustus had to leave was enormous – not just a name and a patrimony, clients and ties of *fides*, but power as well. This was new. Augustus had no sons, and so he was forced to provide legitimate male descendants with the help of his female relatives. His sister Octavia provided him with a nephew and his wife Livia with two stepsons, and he exploited the abundant females of his family (a daughter and four nieces) and ran the whole range of possibilities that marriage, divorce, remarriage after divorce or widowhood and adoption offered (Figures 12.1 and 12.2).

Marriages within the family

The strategy of building alliances among kin, which was begun by Augustus in 25 BC, when he married his daughter (Iulia) to his nephew (Marcellus), and continued with the marriage of his younger stepson (Drusus) with his younger niece (Antonia Minor), led to the formation of a multi-branched imperial family over three to four generations, and it was possible consequently to keep renewing connections in a systematic way with the resulting personnel.

But we have to keep in mind that, after the death of Augustus, there were two competing sources of legitimacy: legitimacy through blood relationship with the founder, Augustus, and legitimacy through blood relationship with the actual ruler, for example, Tiberius or Claudius.

A 'FAMILY' WHICH LACKED MEN AND HAD AN EXCESS OF WOMEN

From the beginning, the family lacked men, specially adult men, and always had an excess of women, particularly surviving women, even in periods when it was provided with male heirs.

Let us choose two characteristic dates: the year 13 BC, corresponding to the supposed date of the ceremonies represented on the *Ara Pacis*, and the year AD 23.

The familial procession depicted on the *Ara Pacis* gives an image of the imperial family at a stage where it was clearly perceived as a *domus* – a house – even if it was not yet named *domus Augusta* (which we do not know). If you consider the individuals and the couples represented there, one observation is apparent, given the fact that Augustus had no brothers and no sons: the priests apart, there is not a single man whose presence is justified otherwise than by his link to Augustus – as a cognate (*cognatus*) or an affine (*adfinis*) – through a woman who is herself a relation of Augustus – a daughter, a sister, a wife, a niece. The female group represented on the *Ara Pacis* is Augustus' family *stricto sensu*. The case of year AD 23 is different, as at that time Tiberius had a number of male relatives, nephews and grandsons, through two males related to him: his brother Drusus the Elder (Drusus I on the figures) and his son, Drusus the Younger (Drusus II on the Figures). In AD 23 when Tiberius' son, Drusus the Younger, died and after him when one of his twins, young Germanicus Gemellus, died too, the *domus Augusta* (as the imperial family was now

named) comprised not only a 65-year-old emperor and four 'Caesares' in the age-span 17 – 3 (Nero Caesar, Drusus Caesar, Gaius Caesar, Tiberius Gemellus), but also four widows (Livia, now named Julia Augusta, Antonia Minor, Agrippina the Elder – Agrippina I on the figures –, Livilla) and four 'Julian' princesses (three by Germanicus and one by Drusus), not forgetting Claudius. Young boys grew up with their sisters and female cousins in houses full of mature and older women, for women had greater prospects of survival than men.

LEGITIMACY THROUGH WOMEN: MARRIAGES AND ADOPTIONS

Let us consider the role of women in transmitting legitimacy – for women were very much utilised as 'vehicles of power' in the phrase of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1983). Girls were, for example, betrothed while still infants; they were married soon after reaching puberty, between the ages of 13 and 15; those who married later had been kept in reserve for a precise relative, thus the elder Agrippina who married Germanicus. And they were remarried at once when divorced or widowed.

Using the prerogatives of a *paterfamilias* and the authority of a *princeps*, Augustus made several attempts to provide himself with a male heir when his marriage to Livia failed to produce a natural child. He had to perform the operation three times, since death kept depriving him of the chosen heirs.

The first two solutions centred on Augustus' daughter, Julia. In the absence of a brother, it was the responsibility of a daughter to produce a successor (in the anthropological meaning of the word). Augustus might adopt Julia's husband or Julia's son as well. Thus, in 25 BC, Julia was married to Marcellus, the son of Augustus' sister Octavia. But this classic combination – the marriage of first cousins – produced no descendants. And young Marcellus died prematurely.

Augustus had to wait for Julia's second marriage (after widowhood) to his friend Agrippa (who was obliged to divorce Augustus' niece, Marcella, to marry Augustus' daughter), a union which in 20 BC produced a son, Gaius, and in 17 BC another, Lucius, and between them a daughter. Augustus adopted his two grandsons as *his* sons and he himself taught them to read, and to write like himself, imitating his way of writing. However, by AD 4, Gaius and Lucius, the adoptive sons, were both dead – at about the age of 20 – and Augustus

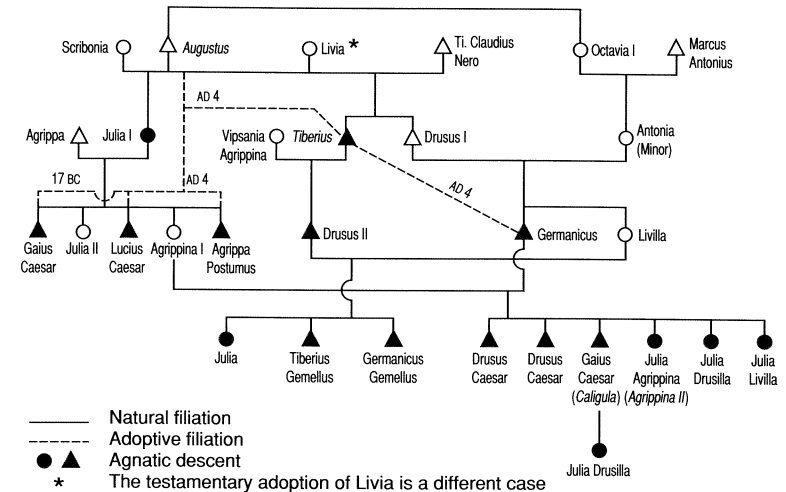


Figure 12.3 The agnatic descendants of Augustus by natural or adoptive filiation

had to rebuild. By adoption, he gave himself two new sons, his stepson, Tiberius, and his last natural grandson, Agrippa Postumus. But Augustus also gave himself two grandsons, who biologically, were Livia's grandsons. He achieved this by constraining Tiberius to adopt his nephew Germanicus (son of his brother, Drusus the Elder) who automatically thereby took age precedence over Tiberius' natural son, Drusus the Younger (Figure 12.3).

After the adoptions, let us consider the marriages. To Gaius, his first adoptive son, Augustus married the sole granddaughter of his wife Livia – here we shall call her, as Suetonius does, Livilla. But the marriage produced no descendant.

After the adoptions of AD 4, Augustus had Germanicus, his adoptive grandson, marry his own granddaughter by blood, Agrippina the Elder, and he married Gaius' widow, Livilla (Livia's granddaughter), to Drusus the Younger, his second adoptive grandson. Thus, in the imperial family, he created two 'Julian' branches destined to produce his great-grandchildren – boys named Caesares and girls named Juliae. Although the two fathers concerned, Germanicus and Drusus the Younger, had been born Claudians, now, after the adoptions, they were members of the Julian family. The children born to the two couples, it turned out, were doubly cousins. Importantly, the marriage of Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder produced

descendants common to Augustus and Livia, as Tacitus (*Ann.* 5, 1) notes.

The study of marriages allows the underlying strategies of alliance to be analysed. The choice lay between a 'closed' or 'open' matrimonial policy. The 'closed' policy – that is marriage between close kin – was usually followed for the older princes who were the potential successors. The 'open' policy – namely marriage not between close kin – was followed for the younger princes and the princesses, at least in the first generations. We shall note the change under Tiberius.

As shown above, direct exchanges were made between the respective grandchildren of Augustus and Livia, whose mothers, Julia (Augustus' daughter married Augustus' friend Agrippa) and Antonia Minor (Augustus' niece, married Livia's younger son), were first cousins: in 1 BC, Livilla was given to Gaius Caesar the heir apparent, and *c.* AD 4–5 Agrippina the Elder was given to Germanicus, who by this date had himself become the heir apparent. At about the same time, the widowed Livilla was remarried to Drusus the Younger.

In the two couples united in AD 4–5 in order to reign or to transmit power, the wife's birth was superior to that of her husband, as each were a closer blood relative to Augustus (a granddaughter and a grandniece) than her husband (a grandnephew and the son of a stepson). Germanicus spent years away from Rome and had his wife accompany him to increase his prestige and to spread the image of a princely couple destined one day to achieve the succession. At her husband's funeral, as the people of Rome shouted, Agrippina was recognised as *solum Augusti sanguinem* (Tac. *Ann.* 3, 4). The noble arrogance of the princess is confirmed by anecdotal evidence. Thus Agrippina, now Germanicus' widow, presented herself to Tiberius, the ruling Emperor, as the 'living image' of Augustus, 'born from his divine blood' (Tac. *Ann.* 4, 52).

In the generation of Augustus and Livia's great-grandchildren, couples were bound by multiple family ties (Figure 12.4). In AD 20, Tiberius arranged the marriage of Julia, his granddaughter by Drusus the Younger, and Nero Caesar, Germanicus and Agrippina's elder son. The young spouses were cross-cousins through Livilla and Germanicus, parallel cousins on their father's side, and cousins again through their common ancestor Agrippa. The two branches of the House were becoming one.

So the purpose of the ruling family was to have sufficient potential heirs, but not too many. Furthermore, for princes who were well placed

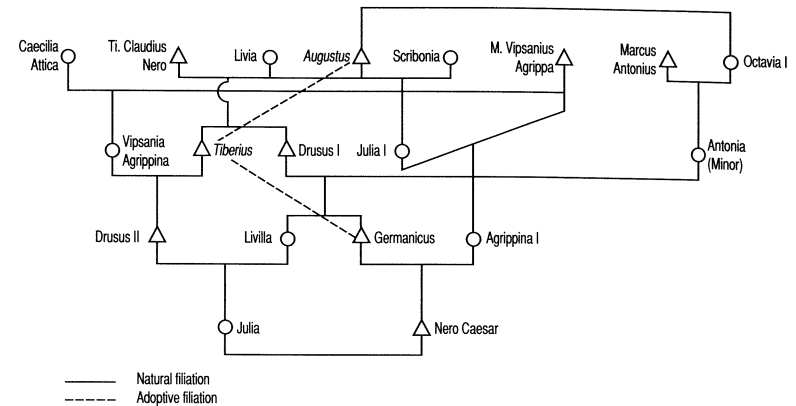


Figure 12.4 Kinship between Nero Caesar and his wife Julia

to succeed to the principate, close-kin marriages served to make the kin closer still and increase the legitimacy of the chosen heir.

The wish to retain a link with Augustus, however, could be very strong: according to Suetonius (*Life of Gaius*, 23), Caligula (Agrippina's son) was prepared to deny that Agrippa was his maternal grandfather so that he could claim descent from an incestuous union between Augustus and his daughter Julia.

One final example will make the point clear. After Claudius was chosen by the praetorians in AD 41, as Germanicus' brother, to succeed his assassinated nephew, Caligula, he never failed to recall his kin-ties to preceding emperors (Caligula apart) as the sole legitimising basis of his power. In the absence of any adoption, he had simply to assume for himself the name Caesar. After his accession he had his grandmother Livia deified – Julia Augusta became Diva Julia – since it was she who connected him the more directly with Augustus. And he confirmed for his mother, Antonia Minor, the name Augusta (given by Caligula in 37): since, through her, he could refer to the deified Augustus as his *avunculus* – in fact *avunculus magnus* (but the link with a maternal uncle is stronger than with a great-uncle). So Claudius' legitimacy was due to these two women, Livia and Antonia (Octavia's daughter), and also, as said above, to his elder brother Germanicus.

Women had no official political roles to play, and so invested in their sons. Augustus' sister, Octavia, although a mother of four daugh-

ters, spent the rest of her life mourning her son Marcellus after his premature death at the age of 20; he had been meant to succeed Augustus, and Octavia was left to resent the interest Augustus subsequently took in Livia's sons.

But two emperors – Tiberius and Nero – were precisely their mother's sons: Tacitus (*Ann.* 1, 5, 4; 12, 68, 3) allows us to see how first Livia, in AD 14, then the second Agrippina, in AD 54, manoeuvred to guarantee the succession for their sons, Tiberius and Nero, when Augustus and Claudius died. Tiberius' accession was due as much to the machinations of his mother Livia as to the premature deaths of Gaius and Lucius, Augustus' adoptive sons. Augustus could then have chosen Germanicus his grandnephew as his successor, and adopted him; the sources say he considered the possibility, but was turned from it by his wife Livia. But he had another reason to prefer an older to a younger man: the principate was still judged a supreme magistracy. As for Nero: his accession was the result of Britannicus' eviction, contrived by his mother, Agrippina the Younger.

If one remembers that, in Rome, legitimate filiation derived from the father, and from the father only, we understand Tiberius' disappointment when, at the death of Augustus, the senate suggested to add to his name 'Julia's son' (Julia being now Livia's name). He was perfectly right in considering himself as Augustus' son, as Augustus had adopted him ten years before, and he did not want to be reminded that this adoption – and subsequently his accession – was the consequence of his mother's remarriage with the *princeps*. But Livia's testamentary adoption and change of name to Julia Augusta might have the precise purpose, in Augustus' intention, of enhancing Tiberius' legitimacy.

However the honour which was denied by Tiberius to his mother, Livia, was in one sense accorded to Agrippina the Younger, Nero's mother. In the *Acts of the Arval Brethren*, dating to between AD 50 and 54, Nero is twice described as 'the progeny (*suboles*) of Agrippina Augusta and the son (*filius*) of Claudius'. The Latin vocabulary respects here a distinction between a biological relation – the maternal filiation – and a social one – the paternal filiation.

DANGER PRESENTED BY WOMEN

The Julio-Claudians did not hesitate to eliminate those who could, potentially, produce rival legitimate heirs. Augustus had set the prece-

dent as early as 29 BC when, after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra, he executed Cleopatra's presumed son by Julius Caesar and Mark Antony's elder son by his wife Fulvia. And his example was not forgotten. When Tiberius came to power, the order was given for the killing of Augustus' grandson, Agrippa Postumus (even though he was no longer an adoptive son after being 'abdicated' from the family in AD 6). And, less than a year after Caligula acceded, his cousin Tiberius Gemellus was driven to suicide. Claudius' son Britannicus did not live beyond the first six months of his adoptive brother's reign.

But what about the women?

The women of the imperial family were much less affected at first. The two Julias were only exiled by Augustus, not killed, for instance. But the two daughters of Claudius were both victimised by Nero, their adoptive brother, one (Octavia) for having married him, the other (Antonia) for refusing to do so. The two Claudian princesses had received names which referred to Claudius' mother and grandmother, the two women who linked Claudius by blood to the founder, Augustus. Claudia Antonia and Claudia Octavia wore as surnames (*cognomina*) the *gentilicia* of these ladies. So the prestige of names extended to the princesses and was transmitted by them. And it explains their popularity: at the news that Nero was going to divorce Octavia (Claudius' younger daughter), the populace at Rome demonstrated in her favour and Nero had to abandon his design. He could break the people's loyalty to Claudius' family only by levelling a charge of adultery and abortion against Octavia.

After the death of his second wife Poppaea, Nero wanted to repair the damage caused to his popularity by his divorce with Octavia, the Emperor Claudius' younger daughter. By marrying Claudius' elder daughter, Claudia Antonia, now a widow, he hoped to reinforce his legitimacy. Thus Antonia was offered an unexpected role: that of legitimising the ruler, her adoptive brother. Her refusal was the cause of her death.

The potential danger represented by the widows who had children and who might remarry was well understood. Augustus and Tiberius adopted opposite policies.

Agrippa was scarcely dead when his widow Julia (mother of the two adopted sons of Augustus) was remarried by her father, Augustus, to his stepson Tiberius – the latter being compelled to divorce a wife he loved, Vipsania Agrippina, who had given him a son and who was again pregnant.

But Agrippina the Elder and Livilla, the two daughters-in-law of Tiberius, were not allowed to remarry when, in AD 19 and AD 23 their husbands, Germanicus and Drusus the Younger, died. In AD 25, Tiberius specifically refused Livilla permission to marry Sejanus, the ambitious praetorian prefect. In his dilatory reply to Sejanus's request, Tiberius, according to Tacitus (*Ann.*, 4, 39–41) would have echoed Augustus's hesitation over the choice of a husband for his daughter Julia: foreseeing⁶ 'to what height the product of such a union would be raised above all others'. In AD 26, Agrippina I in her turn was refused permission to remarry. But not all women were used in the construction of legitimacy, as illustrated by the marriages of the year AD 33. In the absence of sons, daughters were useful until they produced successors. But if an emperor had sons or grandsons in the agnatic line, sisters were no longer needed. After the first generation, the imperial family had no need of new matrimonial alliances with senatorial families. However, celibacy was not the norm at Rome. It was a duty for a *paterfamilias* to marry all his daughters and granddaughters: Tiberius had four of them, three by Germanicus and one by Drusus the Younger. So in the year AD 33, Tiberius adopted the course of 'eliminating' the excess women by marrying them outside the imperial family. He married off his two younger granddaughters by Germanicus – Drusilla and Livilla – and the one by Drusus – Julia, first married to the presumptive heir Nero Caesar, Germanicus' son, now a widow – and to senators who although of consular rank did not bear very prestigious names. This meant that, in AD 33, the prospective heirs, at that time, Caligula and Tiberius Gemellus (as all the other males were dead) could be presented in isolation.

Five years before, in AD 28, Agrippina the Younger (Agrippina II, Nero's mother), Germanicus and Agrippina's elder daughter, had each been married to a close relative, as was previously the custom for princesses.

Agrippina's matrimonial history is in fact a textbook case. She was married at the age of thirteen by her grandfather Tiberius to her cousin Domitius Ahenobarbus, and then, being twice widowed, chose her future husbands herself, one for his wealth, the other for his power. Her first husband was chosen by Tiberius within the *domus Augusta*. As Tacitus says (*Ann.* 4, 75), 'in selecting Domitius, [Tiberius] looked not only to his ancient lineage, but also to his alliance with the blood of the Caesars [*propinquum Caesaris sanguinem*], for he could point to Octavia as his grandmother and *through her* to Augustus as his great-uncle'. At the time of their marriage in AD 28 (young

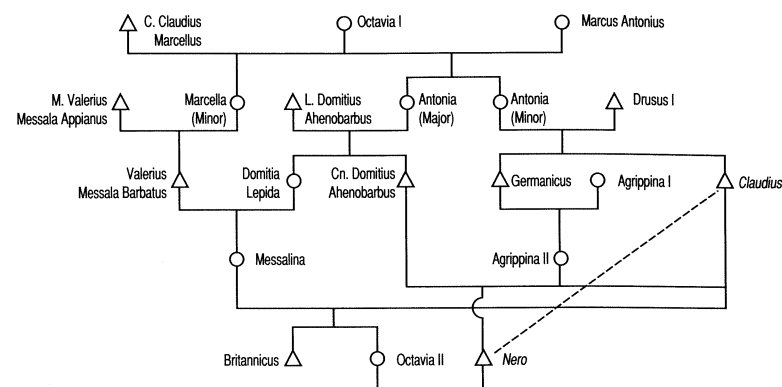


Figure 12.5 Kinship between Nero and his wife Octavia II

Domitius and Agrippina probably had been betrothed from infancy), there was no prospect of succession: since Agrippina had three living brothers (the elder one being married to Tiberius' granddaughter Julia) and a young cousin, Tiberius Gemellus. Provided with four Caesars, Tiberius could marry his granddaughter inside the imperial *domus* without any danger.

Her second husband, C. Sallustius Passienus Crispus, a man much older than she, took away from her cousin and sister-in-law, Domitia, and secured his fortune for her son Nero who inherited from his father-in-law.

The third husband, the Emperor Claudius, her paternal uncle, she captivated in 49, after Messalina's death, and so placed Nero in line to succeed his new stepfather. According to Tacitus (*Ann.* 12, 2, 3), the argument developed by Pallas, Augustus' freedman, in favour of Agrippina was this: 'She would bring with her Germanicus' grandson, who was thoroughly worthy of imperial rank, the scion of a noble race and a link to unite the descendants of the Claudian family.' 'He hoped that a woman who had proved her fertility and was still in the freshness of youth, would not carry off the grandeur of the Caesars to some other house.'

However, even though he shared Augustus' blood through his mother Agrippina, Nero would not have become an emperor if the Emperor Claudius, his great-uncle, had not adopted him as a Claudius. But Claudius had a son, Britannicus. Agrippina had to prepare his removal. 'By marrying Claudius, she made Nero the

Emperor's stepson. With the betrothals of Nero and Claudius' daughter, Octavia, she made Nero the Emperor's son-in-law. Then she had to persuade Claudius that he should imitate Tiberius, who having himself a son, Drusus, had adopted another, Germanicus (Figure 12.5). But (she probably did not remind him of this point) Tiberius had been compelled by Augustus to do so.

DOMUS AUGUSTA

Augustus laid the foundations of a *domus* – a 'house' in the sense that Claude Lévi-Strauss (1990) from an anthropological point of view has suggested giving to the familial structure of this kind. A *domus* that fused together two principal lines – Julian and Claudian – and the social and symbolic capital of each, but which also drew in other lines such as those of the *Antonii* and the *Domitii*.

Deprived of sons, Augustus lived surrounded by women and it was their marriages that provided members for the *domus*. Not all members of the *domus Augusta* were members of the *gens Iulia*; but in case of need, new men from the *domus* could be incorporated into the *gens* as Augustus' sons or grandsons. The *domus* functioned as a source, a reservoir (Corbier 1994a).

Because power and legitimacy were at stake, Augustus and his successors had to draw the boundaries of the *domus* so as to exclude unworthy members and create by adoption internal hierarchies to define an order of succession within the *domus*. It was the responsibility of the *princeps*, and of him alone, to delineate this internal hierarchy. As the succession remained bound up with filiation, members of the *gens Iulia* – males in the first rank – constituted the backbone of the *domus Augusta*. The tactics followed in building the *domus* had the effect of placing on an agnatic line men who were still Augustus' relatives with the status of cognate or affine. Thus Germanicus, who was at the same time Octavia's grandson and Livia's grandson, became in AD 4 Augustus' grandson (in agnatic line) after his adoption by Tiberius, himself adopted by Augustus. His marriage with Agrippina the Elder provided Augustus with children who legally were his great-grandsons in agnatic line and biologically his great-grandsons by blood.

Conversely, men and women who were members of the *domus*, and even of the *gens*, like Julia, Augustus' daughter, and Agrippa Postumus, Augustus' last adoptive son, could be discarded from the circle of the family. Others like Claudius, even though he was a member

of the *domus* (like his brother Germanicus, he was Octavia's grandson and Livia's grandson), never entered the *gens*. He remained within the circle, but close to the boundaries, so that contemporaries themselves sometimes doubted if he was a member of the *domus* or not (Tac. *Ann.*, 3, 18).

The *domus Augusta* was a closed circle. How could one get in, if not by marriage? Sejanus, the praetorian prefect of Tiberius, tried twice to force the doors: in AD 25, when he asked for the hand of Livilla, widow of Drusus the Younger, and found himself turned down by Tiberius. But in AD 31, apparently, at the time of his downfall, he had obtained the longed-for *adfinitas* with a promise of marriage which made him a *gener* of the Emperor and a member of the *domus*; even if the identity of his fiancée – Livilla herself, or her daughter Julia, widow of Nero Caesar – is not certain.

In AD 41, after Caligula's murder, according to the Jewish historian Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 19, 251),

there were some who aspired to the throne by reason both of their distinguished birth and of their marriage connections. For instance, Marcus Vinicius had a good claim both because of his noble birth and by his marriage to Gaius' sister Julia [Livilla].

From this passage, we can conclude that, in the absence of a male successor, marriage with a princess could give some hope of the succession.

CONCLUSION

It is worth comparing the complex network of marriage alliances and adoptions formed by the respective descendants of Augustus and Livia, or by the descendants of Octavia, Augustus' sister, with the Flavian family.

The Flavians had so many males that they could invest in their *gens* and were not encouraged to construct a large *domus*. Vespasian had two sons (and a daughter) and at the very beginning of his reign he announced in the Senate that no one other than his sons would be his successor. He also had a brother who himself had two grandsons by his son.² There was no need to incorporate new young men into the *gens*.

But Augustus' lesson was not forgotten: the Flavians married the women of their blood (the grand-nephews of Vespasian, Sabinus

and Clemens, married his granddaughters Julia and Domitilla); they did not give them to outsiders. So, even if Domitian adopted two grand-nephews by his sister, Flavia Domitilla, and his niece, his relationship with the two boys was not only an avuncular one: the boys, born from his patrilineal cousin, T. Flavius Clemens, still were Flavii; they only moved from one branch of the *gens* to another. The Flavian dynasty had a short life – but as a familial structure it was a *gens Flavia*.

It remains to say only that the construction of the *domus Augusta* by Augustus was purely casual. Augustus had no choice. If he had had sons, there would probably have been no scope for prominent women like his granddaughter and his great-granddaughter – the two Agrippinas.

A new reality, which would come to acquire the lasting name of *domus*, and specifically, in the first decades following the death of Augustus, officially bore the name *domus Augusta*, was long years in the process of definition. The varying nature of its composition posed a more general question: that of the construction of a kinship group sufficiently large to ensure its reproduction and survival by internal alliances, and sufficiently exclusive to avoid the distribution of rights of succession among too many rival candidates. Such a construction was made possible within Roman traditions by divorce, remarriage and adoption (Corbier 1987, 1990, 1991), rights which offered possibilities for adaptation to circumstances, but which would in due course be denied to the dynasts of Christian Europe. For a new problem, solutions were borrowed from the classic armoury of Roman law: if the *domus* was constructed initially with the family relationships of the founder, its composition and internal hierarchy were subsequently modified on several occasions by the decisions of the ‘patriarch’. It was he who decided remarriages, divorces or adoptions, but he had to take account of premature deaths, psychological incapacities and the misbehaviour of individual members of the *domus*.

Augustus was constrained to operate within a context that was both general – the tradition of alliances between the great families of the Roman aristocracy – and particular – the relative lack in his family of males, and especially males who survived long enough to become heirs, and the corresponding superabundance of females who thus found themselves entrusted with a responsibility never before theirs in Rome: that of the transmission of legitimacy.

NOTES

- 1 From the *Senatus Consultum* of December AD 19 on the funerary honours accorded to Germanicus, recorded on the *Tabula Siarensis* (*L'Année Épigraphique* 1984: 508) and from the *SC de Cn. Pisone patre* soon to be published by W. Eck (for a preliminary commentary, see Eck 1993).
- 2 According to the genealogy currently accepted: see Raepsaet-Charlier 1987: table 12.