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Senatorial Bias in the Portrayal of Gaius Caligula

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The name “Caligula” is synonymous with the most egregious excesses of the Roman Empire. Known for his extravagant spending, vicious temper, and outright madness, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, better known as Caligula, is seen as more monster than man. Despite his horrible reputation, many of Caligula’s actions enriched the lives of the public and are often ignored by historians in lieu of his infamous violence, wrought out of a lifetime of fear living under a hostile Senate and his cruel uncle Tiberius. Even his most extreme acts were not without reason in the cutthroat environment of the early Roman Empire, and ancient authors who made claims of incest and insanity against him exaggerated and fabricated events of his life as a means to slander Caligula and support the senatorial elite’s biases against him. Many of Caligula’s actions had damaged the purses and reputations of past senators, so the Senate’s writers assured that no other leader would ever do so without the fear of a ruined legacy.

Caligula’s relationships with the public and Senate took opposing paths early in his childhood. In the case of the people and Gaius, it was practically love at first sight. While Gaius’ family would lose their freedom in the coming years, the future emperor reportedly spent much of his time around soldiers. His father, Germanicus, a general who had “won such intense popular devotion that he was in danger of being mobbed to death whenever he arrived,”¹ took Gaius with him on military campaigns in Germania. His mother, Agrippina, dressed the toddler up in a miniature soldier’s uniform, which the actual troops found hilarious. They gave him the nickname “Caligula,” derived from the Latin *caligae*,² meaning “little boots.” While Gaius came

¹ Suetonius, “Gaius Caligula” in *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2007), 146.

² Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 149.

to dislike the childish name into his adulthood, the bond between him and the soldiers would be one that lasted even after his assassination.

Caligula's experience with the Roman Senate was the polar opposite of the one with his people. The Senate gave him his first lesson in the brutal politics of Rome in 19 CE at the age of 7, when Germanicus suddenly fell ill during a campaign in Antioch under the care of Syrian governor Gnaeus Piso. His symptoms were not typical of any common ailment, as "foam (formed) on his lips" and "dark stains... covered his body."³ Poison was immediately suspected as the cause of death, and Suetonius claims that most Romans thought there was foul play involving the emperor himself. The accepted story goes that "Tiberius craftily arranged Germanicus' death with the advice and assistance of Gnaeus Piso,"⁴ both of whom believed that keeping around such a charismatic leader was a threat to their positions. Furious at her husband's death and Tiberius's betrayal of her family, Agrippina began feuding with the emperor. It was a decided victory for Tiberius, as he and the Senate systematically exiled and imprisoned her and two of her sons for the high crime of treason by the year 28. Caligula was the last son of Germanicus standing, but was very young and allowed to stay with his three sisters as prisoners at his uncle Tiberius's palace in Caprae. It seemed his uncle enjoyed legislating less than he did the company of "(b)evies of girls and toy boys,"⁵ so the Senate grew in power while the emperor vacationed. The senators became comfortable with their newfound power and wanted to keep it that way. Up-and-coming politician and Praetorian prefect Sejanus even "turned to the idea of inducing Tiberius to spend his days in some pleasant retreat at a distance from Rome. The

³ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 145.

⁴ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 145.

⁵ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 127.

advantages, he foresaw, were numerous.”⁶ Sejanus had almost brought on the total upheaval of the empire before his execution by Tiberius in 31. Despite the end of Sejanus’s rise to power, it still signified that an emperor’s power was far from secure. Caligula would not be satisfied with the instability of his position and the Senate’s approval of his family’s exile when he got into office.

Caligula’s first hands-on experience with the Senate came after Tiberius’ death in March of 37. Caligula had played the role of dutiful prisoner perfectly, even gaining the title of joint heir with Tiberius Gemellus from his uncle, beating out the man’s own son to become emperor with the help of the Praetorian prefect Macro. The beginning of Caligula’s reign was widely celebrated, even by the statesmen. Overjoyed by the fact that Germanicus’ son was their new leader, the Romans would sacrifice 160,000 animals in his honor in first months of his reign, chanting “such endearments as ‘star,’ ‘chick,’ ‘baby,’ and ‘pet,’” as Caligula led Tiberius’s funeral.⁷ His popularity grew exponentially more by his removal of the previous emperor’s sales tax and donation of bonuses to the soldiers.⁸ The Senate wasn’t thrilled with Caligula’s liberal use of state funds, but they remained cordial at first, as the emperor took an oath before them and hosted feasts for the Roman nobility.⁹

It took just over six months and a life-threatening illness of his own for him to completely turn on the Senate. Stretching throughout the entirety of October of 37, 24 year old Gaius lay bedridden. Modern scholars have provided explanations as to what the young emperor was

⁶ Tacitus, “Book IV” in *Roman History*, (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1937), Volume IV: 75

⁷ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 151.

⁸ Cassius Dio, “Book LIX” in *Roman History*, Volume VII: (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1924), 263.

⁹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 154.

suffering from, such as temporal lobe epilepsy or hyperthyroidism, yet they cannot describe the violent behavior he exhibited towards the Senate.^{10 11} That can only be described as paranoia, shaped from the fear that he would meet the same fate as his much of his family. Senators and guards alike began to make arrangements for the emperor's death, making Caligula all the more suspicious that he was poisoned. Cassius Dio reports that multiple statesmen were executed shortly after his recovery, including the man who had helped bring him to power. Caligula believed that Macro could betray him just as easily as he had Tiberius, so he "involved him in a scandal, in which he himself had the greatest share, by bringing against him among other charges that of playing the pander,"¹² meaning that Macro was essentially accused of pimping himself out to anyone who appeared to be gaining power. Having isolated anyone willing to be his political ally, the Senate remained at odds with the principate for the rest of his brief four year reign.

The emperor recovered from his illnesses early in 38, not wavering in his promise to make improvements to the lives of the commons. In order to ensure his people would not face famine, he had the harbors of Rhegium and Sicily restored, now fit "for the reception of the ships that brought corn from Egypt"¹³ and facilitating future transport. Another contribution was his decision to reinstate Augustan-era democratic elections, something Tiberius had thrown out. When writing on the subject, Cassius Dio complained that "with the elections once more in the

¹⁰ Robert S. Katz, "The Illness of Caligula," *The Classical World* 65, no. 7 (1972): 223-25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4347670>.

¹¹ Thomas D. Benediktson, "Caligula's Phobias and Philiis: Fear of Seizure?" *The Classical Journal* 87, no. 2 (1991): 159-63. www.jstor.org/stable/3297970.

¹² Cassius Dio, "Book LIX" in *Roman History*, (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1924), Volume VII: 292.

¹³ Josephus, "Book XIX" in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 1st ed. trans. William Whiston. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1905), 307.

hands of the people and the plebs,” “many disasters would result.”¹⁴ His reaction shows a clear bias against the lower class that Caligula championed. Another example of this is his affinity for actors, who he frequently spent time with. Dio considered him “the slave of the actors and others connected with the stage,” criticizing the emperor’s regard for the artisans, who were considered ruffians by Roman standards.¹⁵ Caligula would show much higher respect to them than the senators, letting them kiss him in public while often refusing to extend a hand to his betters.¹⁶ Many other decisions of Caligula’s would also come under fire, despite being popular with the public. Notable for his extravagant spending, many new structures were built and gladiator games held under Caligula.¹⁷ Despite acknowledging the boost in morale both of these developments created, Suetonius does not laud Gaius for the amount spent in realizing them. He claims that the emperor bankrupted the state and “squandered Tiberius’ entire fortune of 2,700 million sesterces,”¹⁸ but the actions of the following emperor seem to dispute this. Claudius is said to have awarded his consuls and praetorian guards a sum of 15 million sesterces,¹⁹ a donation that would’ve been impossible without a large part of the treasury surviving. While he may have not been the most frugal leader, Gaius did ensure that his people would be cared for and gain back their political power.

Besides the accusations of being a serial spender, the two most abhorrent charges brought up against Caligula are those of incest and insanity. Both of these should be taken with a grain of salt, especially the charges of incest, as they didn’t develop until after his death. The only works

¹⁴ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 289.

¹⁵ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 275.

¹⁶ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 349.

¹⁷ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 154-155.

¹⁸ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 165.

¹⁹ Tacitus, “Book XII” in Vol. IV, *Roman History*, (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1937), 393.

about Gaius that were written during his lifetime were those of Philo of Alexandria and Jospheus, two Jewish historians who had travelled to Rome to speak up about their people's treatment. Neither of them had any reason to care for or protect Caligula; in fact, the contrary was much more true, "for he regarded the Jews with most especial suspicion, as if they were the only persons who cherished wishes opposed to his."²⁰ Another reason neither man respected the emperor was his tendency to sleep around, especially with married women. Caligula also considered himself a living god, a strategic move to put himself in the same league as Caesar and Augustus. One way of showing this was by erecting statues of himself, with the most controversial one being put in a Jerusalem temple, which Philo explicitly criticised.²¹ Even with all of these marks against him, Philo never accuses Caligula of having an inappropriate relationship with his own sisters. In contrast, Josephus briefly mentions an incestuous relationship between Drussila and Caligula.²² The conflicting reports between contemporaries further complicate the already muddled history of Gaius, but it seems strange for the critical Philo to leave out such a taboo detail. Perhaps the stories involving incest were floating around in the Roman Senate's rumor mill at the time, and were adopted by writers like Josephus. Such stories carried on throughout other histories like Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars*. Growing up in an equestrian family with a grandfather connected to the Senate during his reign,²³ Suetonius may have heard and spread the upper class's perverse rumors about Caligula and his sisters just as Josephus had before. Suetonius would go on to take the rumor even further, alleging that

²⁰ Philo, "On the Embassy to Gaius" in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 117.

²¹ Philo, "On the Embassy to Gaius," 203.

²² Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 507.

²³ Michael Gagarin, "Suetonius" in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Caligula was involved with all three of his sisters.²⁴ Cassius Dio would continue to perpetuate this ever-growing story in his own writing, displaying a bias of his own as a Greek senator himself.²⁵

The closeness between the imperial family can easily be explained away without any pretenses of incest. Julia Drusilla was clearly his favorite of the three, as she sat next to Caligula at banquets and was deified after her tragically young death in 38.²⁶ After studying coins with her likeness stamped on them, historians have found that “some provincial issues from Miletus and Smyrna single out Drusilla for the special honors appropriate to the chosen heir. Both issues may predate her death, since such honors to living imperial family members have ample precedents in the Greek East.”²⁷ If Caligula was priming Drusilla for the throne in case he died, it would be logical to position her next to him at dinners to introduce her to public life. Caligula’s closeness with her and his other sisters could also be a result of the shared trauma they experienced as prisoners in Tiberius’ palace, something Suetonius compared to slavery.²⁸ Whatever the true reason for their familial bond, it’s clear that the possibility of incest was not reported until decades after Germanicus’ children had died off.

While the claims of incest leveled at Caligula were meant as pure titillation, those of insanity were used to write off any of his actions offensive to the Senate. Possibly the most infamous story about Caligula involves him proposing that his horse Incitatus should be given

²⁴ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 157.

²⁵ John Roberts, “Cassius Dio” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ Michael Gagarin, “Julia Drussila” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁷ Wood, Susan. "Diva Drusilla Panthea and the Sisters of Caligula." *American Journal of Archaeology* 99, no. 3 (1995): 462. <https://doi.org/10.2307/506945>.

²⁸ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 150.

the title of consul.²⁹ Suetonius and Cassius both describe this event as a legitimate example of the emperor losing hold of the reins of sanity. Recently though, contemporary scholars have begun to question whether Caligula's comment was serious or merely a jest at the expense of the Senate.³⁰ Having their political competency compared to that of a horse would do little to please the Senate. Convincing readers to frame this event as Caligula legitimately attempting to make an animal a government official would allow the Senate to regain its dignity and discredit the emperor. The most extreme example of Caligula's distaste for the Senate was his willingness to kill senators, even keeping notebooks in "his private papers entitled *Dagger and Sword*, each of them containing the names and particulars of men whom he had planned to kill."³¹ Many of the men who he actually had executed were believed to be threats to his position. The most high profile execution was that of "Lentulus Gaetulicus, who had an excellent reputation in every way and had been governor of Germany for ten years, for the reason that he was endeared to the soldiers."³² By this time in year 39, Caligula was already greatly disliked by most of the elite. Taking out someone like Gaetulicus who had an army behind him was just a way of saving his own neck. Such a survival instinct is possibly the only reason Gaius made it four years with a hostile Senate behind him. His ultimate demise came from a plot devised from one of his own tax collectors, Cassius Chaera.³³ In January of 41, Gaius Julius Caesar met a fate frighteningly

²⁹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 174.

³⁰ David Woods, "CALIGULA, INCITATUS, AND THE CONSULSHIP," *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, 64, no. 2 (2014): 772-77. Accessed January 22, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/43905613.

³¹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 171.

³² Cassius Dio, "Book LIX" in *Roman History*, 304.

³³ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 176.

similar to that of his namesake, stabbed to death by a man named Cassius and his co-conspirators.

News of the emperor's death spread immediately, and the reactions are yet another reason to question how terrible Caligula actually was. The message first reached his Germanic guard, who would go on to slay a few of the senators involved with the plot. Josephus is critical in describing these men, remarking that "they did not use their reason in judging about public affairs, but measured all by the advantages themselves received, Caius being beloved by them because of the money he gave them, by which he had purchased their kindness to him."³⁴ If the guards truly just supported Caligula for the money he gave them, there would be no need for them to defend him after his death. Whether it be familial loyalty to the son of the beloved Germanicus or respect for the emperor in his own right, something urged the men to fight for Caligula's honor. The next party to hear of his death was the crowd at the nearby theater, a mixture of both poor and noble people. While the rich quietly celebrated their enemy's demise, the attending women, children, and slaves began to mourn. Not only had he ensured his nation's health through "certain distributions of flesh-meat among them," Caligula "had also allowed to accuse and to despise their masters, and they could have recourse to his assistance when they had unjustly affronted them."³⁵ Yet these positive opinions of Caligula from the many common people would never outweigh those of the powerful Senate, and the writings based on their views would ensure that his memory would be one forever tainted by claims of incest and insanity.

Put simply, Caligula's story is yet another example proving that winners write the history books. The topic of bias in the primary sources on Caligula could make scholars reconsider

³⁴ Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 502.

³⁵ Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 502.

whether some of the more infamous incidents involving him actually happened. Researchers must continue to search for alternative perspectives on Caligula throughout history, as a person is rarely ever as black or white as the known ancient writers have portrayed him as. It is the historian's duty to look at the past as objectively as possible, and the story of Caligula deserves the same respect. Recent scholarship concerning him is heading in this direction, indicating that the story of Caligula will no longer be controlled by a Senate out to attack anyone who dared to challenge their authority.

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