

**DARK SECRET HISTORIES**

Joe Murray Callaghan (ed.)

**Eccentric, Bloody and  
Strange Roman  
Antiquity Episodes**

feat. Caligula, Incitatus, Valeria Messalina, Nero, Commodus, Sol Invictus, Caracalla, Elagabalus

*... and Its Intriguing Dangerous  
Splendour*

**INTEGRAL**

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**#3**

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# The Madness of Caligula and the Political Career of His Favourite Horse

Caligula is considered to be Rome's most tyrannical emperor. His reign from 37-41 AD is filled with murder and debauchery, to levels even his infamous nephew Nero could not reach. The great-great grandson of Julius Caesar certainly left his mark by his possible madness and definitely horrific acts.

The story of Caligula is a legacy that goes back thousands of years. In his short life of only 29 years, he experienced terrible tragedy, a deep hatred for the man who killed his family, great power as the emperor of Rome and eventually, a brutal death. In the latter years of his life, his behavior became so outlandish and extreme that many believe he was suffering from insanity. Some say he was driven to madness by the events in his life, while others say he may have been mentally ill or suffering the effects of a disease.

Caligula, born Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus in 31 AD, was the Emperor of Rome between 37 and 41 AD. Remembered as a cruel and erratic tyrant, his deranged tendencies threw Rome into chaos—and eventually caused his violent end. A large number of strange stories are told about him.

When young Gaius was growing up, his father would dress him in a child-sized soldier's uniform whenever he brought him on campaign. As such, the troops took to calling him *Caligula*, which means "little boots". We don't know if the men meant it affectionately or as an insult, but either way, Caligula apparently hated the nickname. He grew up with a massive chip on his shoulder—and it only got worse as he got older.

Even as a grown man, Caligula despised his nickname, so he did what any self-respecting emperor would do: he made a new one. And as you can imagine, his choice wasn't exactly humble. He called himself Jupiter, after the Roman King of the Gods, and made senators refer to him as such. He named himself a god, dressed himself like a god and built a temple to himself.

Historical accounts of Caligula may vary, but nearly all historians agreed on one dark fact: this deranged emperor placed very little value on human life. In one twisted story, Caligula was supposedly meant to sacrifice a bull to the gods by hitting it over the head with a huge mallet. At the last minute, Caligula had an even worse idea—he turned and struck the priest instead. He then apparently laughed at the priest as he died.

According to Suetonius, Caligula was extremely interested in the Egyptian practice of using incest to protect the royal bloodline. The emperor decided to do the same himself and embarked on incestuous relationships with all three of his sisters in the hope of perfectly preserving his royal blood. (Anyway, we should note that Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars* was written 80 years after Caligula's assassination, and since earlier chronicles never mention Caligula's incestuous behavior, it may be an exaggeration on Suetonius's part.)

As befitting a gilded emperor, Caligula absolutely loved gold. He allegedly liked to spread gold coins all over the ground and walk on them with his bare feet.

Pliny's history of Cleopatra described a decadent—and utterly revolting—cocktail. The Egyptian Queen apparently melted a pearl earring in vinegar and drank it. Of course, Caligula wasn't about to be outdone in hedonism, so he is also reported to have enjoyed this extravagant drink. And as if that wasn't enough, he also had his dinner table set with golden loaves of bread.

While Caligula was still alive, he erected a temple dedicated to himself and placed a life-sized golden statue in his own image inside. Each day, he had the statue dressed in whatever he was wearing, and Rome's wealthiest citizens would make offerings to the emperor there. Gifts included flamingoes, peacocks and other exotic animals that the Romans greatly admired.

Even before he was Emperor, Caligula had an innate viciousness. He enjoyed watching executions and indulged in scandalous behavior at night—but that's not even the worst part: Tiberius knew what kind of person his heir was, but named him all the same. As Caligula became more unhinged, the aging emperor commented "I am nursing a viper in Rome's bosom..."

The jubilant public celebrated Caligula's ascension the only way they knew how: they started sacrificing animals—and a lot of them. Suetonius recorded that the Romans sacrificed a whopping 160,000 animals in the first three months of Caligula's reign.

The people of Rome had extremely high hopes for Caligula's rule. After all, he came from a pretty amazing pedigree and many were sympathetic to the nightmares he went through as a child. And, believe it or not, he lived up to their greatest hopes... at first. He freed unjustly imprisoned citizens, gave bonuses to military men, and eliminated a highly unpopular tax.

The Roman historian Philo described those first few months as "blissful," but the bliss ended almost as quickly as it started.

Very soon, Caligula's madness began to creep into his actions. Early in his reign, he decided to spend a fortune to build a floating bridge across the Bay of Naples... just to stick it to one of his naysayers. Before he took the throne, the astrologer Thrasyllus made a prediction that Caligula "had no more chance of becoming emperor than of riding a horse across the Gulf of Baiae". Caligula set out to prove the man a fool—and he went to desperate lengths to do so.

The bridge, built on countless floating pontoons, allegedly stretched three miles across the Bay and featured several rest stops with drinking water along the way. When his glorious (and pointless) bridge was completed, Caligula supposedly covered himself in a gold cloak, put on Alexander the Great's breastplate and crossed the bridge on his horse.

Approximately six to seven months after taking power, Caligula suddenly fell ill, possibly by poisoning. He recovered, but by all accounts, the painful illness broke something in his mind—and Rome shook from the consequences. He began having his family members killed, beginning with his cousin (and heir) Gemellus. His grandmother was utterly furious with him, but she too died shortly after.

Some claimed he poisoned her, while others said it was suicide. He also had his father-in-law and brother-in-law executed, and his two living sisters exiled.

Caligula didn't just think of himself as a god—he resented the actual gods for being worshipped alongside him! He ordered the heads removed from statues of various gods all across Rome, and replaced them all with his own likeness...

Many historians, both ancient and modern, have tried to explain what made Caligula so mad. Some have speculated that he suffered from epilepsy—or, as Suetonius called it, "falling sickness". Some writers believe that Caligula lived in constant fear of having a seizure, and this made him paranoid and cruel. To further the epilepsy diagnosis, multiple sources confirmed that Caligula could not swim, despite the fact that swimming lessons would absolutely have been a part of his education. One reason for this might be that he was afraid he would have a seizure and drown while in the water.

In yet another of the famous stories about Caligula's megalomania, he once stood near a statue of Jupiter and asked a nearby actor who was more mighty—himself or the god. Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place, the man took a moment to think of the right answer—which was evidently not the right move. Caligula's response was utterly chilling. He flew into a rage and had him viciously whipped.

Not only did Caligula want to be a god, but he supposedly also had conversations with them. Rumors suggested that he talked to the moon at night and invited her to his bed. He was also said to speak to Jupiter directly, sometimes threatening him outright, and claimed that the spirit of the ocean spoke to him when he couldn't sleep.

When several client kings came to Rome to pay their respects to him and argued about their nobility of descent, he allegedly cried out the Homeric line: "Let there be one lord, one king!". In 40, Caligula began implementing very controversial policies that introduced religion into his political role. Caligula began appearing in public dressed as various gods and demigods such as Hercules, Mercury, Venus and Apollo. Reportedly, he began referring to himself as a god when meeting with politicians and he was referred to as "Jupiter" on occasion in public documents.

A sacred precinct was set apart for his worship at Miletus in the province of Asia and two temples were erected for worship of him in Rome. The Temple of Castor and Pollux on the forum was linked directly to the imperial residence on the Palatine and dedicated to Caligula. He would appear there on occasion and present himself as a god to the public. Caligula had the heads removed from various statues of gods located across Rome and replaced them with his own. It is said that he wished to be worshipped as *Neos Helios*, the "New Sun". Indeed, he was represented as a sun god on Egyptian coins.

Caligula's religious policy was a departure from that of his predecessors. According to Cassius Dio, living emperors could be worshipped as divine in the east and dead emperors could be worshipped as divine in Rome. Augustus had the public worship his spirit on occasion, but Dio describes this as an extreme act that emperors generally shied away from. Caligula took things a step further and had those in Rome, including senators, worship him as a tangible, living god.

About halfway through his reign, Caligula broke with the Senate and started using every opportunity to humiliate them. According to historians, around 39 AD, he removed and replaced all of the Consuls without asking the Senate's approval. He would also reportedly force senators to run alongside his chariot dressed in their full robes. He laughed as he made everyone around them miserable. By the time Caligula died, he was so hated that the Senate pushed to have him completely erased from Roman history. They ordered the destruction of his statues and public inscriptions, and his coins were pulled from circulation and melted down whenever possible.

Caligula apparently also enjoyed performing and liked to show off whenever possible. One story claims that he once called his Consuls to his room in the middle of the night and forced them to watch him sing and dance while barely dressed. When he went to actual performances, he also liked to sing along with actors.

Caligula always had the best clothes that money could buy. He particularly enjoyed silks and ornately decorated items, but he also had some unusual tastes. As mentioned by contemporary historians, he liked to dress as Neptune and Jupiter, but that was just the beginning. He would also sometimes dress as a woman, or as female gods such as Diana and Juno. He had an extensive collection of jewelry and a shoe collection that included many female shoes.

Caligula was tall, slim, and pale with sunken eyes and thinning hair. While his head was bald, his body was extremely hairy, and as a result, he was often the subject of jokes. Some compared his appearance to a goat. This had made him conscious of his looks and he ordered men with thicker hair to shave their heads. Mentioning a goat in his presence was made a capital crime by him, punishable by being beaten with an iron stick.

Caligula had a keen interest in gladiators. Once fighting one of the gladiators with wooden swords, the gladiator deliberately fell, perhaps to honor the young emperor. Caligula pounced on him and killed him with a real dagger.

The gladiatorial games were not only for public exhibition and political reputation, but also to serve up Roman justice. Criminals and slaves were often sacrificed to vicious beasts for entertainment—but apparently that wasn't enough for someone as bloodthirsty as Caligula. One day, the emperor allegedly found the day's activities to be a little dull, so he ordered his guards to throw an entire section of the crowd to the beasts to make up it.

Caligula allegedly carried two notebooks with him wherever he went. One was "the Dagger," and the other "the Sword". They contained the names of people whom he wanted to prosecute, imprison, or execute.

According to Suetonius's biography, lightning utterly terrified Caligula. To protect himself whenever he was afraid, he was said to have worn a crown of laurels on his head, because the leaves were from a tree that never got hit by lightning.

After the death of his first wife, Caligula snatched his second wife from her wedding to another man. His third wife was a married woman whose husband was forced to give her to the emperor. His fourth wife Milonia Caesonia maintained his interest. She was promiscuous and vivacious and he paraded her naked in front of his friends. She bore him his only child Drusilla, named after his sister, who also happened to be his mistress in his youth. Suetonius and Cassius Dio provide additional tales of insanity. They accuse Caligula of incest with all his sisters, Agrippina the Younger, Drusilla and Livilla, and say he prostituted them to other men. It was Suetonius who first published claims that Caligula committed incest with his three sisters. (The Roman historian added that these trysts even occurred during banquets, as guests and Caligula's wife gathered around.) But Suetonius wrote *The Lives of the Caesars* in 121 A.D., 80 years after Caligula was assassinated at age 28 by members of the Praetorian Guard. Earlier chroniclers who actually lived under Caligula, namely Seneca and Philo, make no mention of this type of behavior despite their harsh criticism of the emperor. And Tacitus, during a lengthy diatribe in which he accuses Caligula's sister Agrippina—wife of the Emperor Claudius—of incest with her son, never implicates her brother.

Caligula was the third emperor of the Roman empire. He was born on August 31, 12 AD in Antium, Italy (known now as Anzio, Italy). His parents were Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder, and he was one of six children, with siblings named Nero, Drusus, Agrippina the Younger, Julia Drusilla, and Julia Livilla. His given name was Gaius Caesar Germanicus, but at the age of three he was given the nickname Caligula, meaning "little boot", when accompanying his father on campaigns—the soldiers were amused at his tiny soldier outfit.

His father Germanicus was the nephew and adopted son of emperor Tiberius. Germanicus' death in 19 AD was accompanied by rumors that Tiberius had ordered him poisoned because they were political rivals. Agrippina the Elder believed Tiberius to be responsible her husband's death, publicly declaring that she would seek revenge for her deceased husband. In response, Tiberius imprisoned Agrippina

the Elder, Nero, and Drusus, and the three of them perished while incarcerated. Because of Caligula's young age, he was spared from imprisonment and sent to live with Livia—Tiberius' mother.

In 31 AD, Caligula was summoned to the island of Capri to live with Tiberius. Caligula was adopted by Tiberius, his father's supposed killer, and the young man was forced to hide his hatred from his adopted parent. Soon, Caligula and his cousin Gemellus were made equal heirs to the throne. However, upon Tiberius' death in 37 AD, Caligula's ally Marco arranged for Caligula to be named the sole emperor. Shortly thereafter, Caligula had Gemellus and Marco put to death.

Caligula was only 25-years-old when he became the emperor of Rome in 37 AD. Finally freed from being the "pampered prisoner" of his father's murderer, Caligula was a loved and welcomed emperor. He granted bonuses to those in the military, eliminated unfair taxes, and freed those who had been unjustly imprisoned.

He also hosted lavish chariot races, gladiator shows, and plays. He ordered the bones of his mother and brothers retrieved and placed them in the tomb of Augustus.

Caligula was very tall and pale. While his head was bald, his body was extremely hairy, and as a result, he was often the subject of jokes. Caligula subsequently made it a crime for anyone to mention a goat in his presence—the punishment for poking fun? Death.

A few short months after Caligula became emperor, he became seriously ill. It was believed that he may have been poisoned. Although he recovered from his illness, it is said that at this point Caligula went mad. He began killing those close to him or sending them to exile. He had Tiberius Gemellus, his cousin and adopted son, executed. Caligula's grandmother was outraged by this and died soon thereafter. There is disagreement as to how she died, with some saying she committed suicide, and others insisting she was poisoned by Caligula. Either scenario makes sense, especially when you read that Caligula liked to remind people of his power by repeating the phrase, "Remember that I have the right to do anything to anybody".

One of Caligula's most egregious acts was in declaring that he was a living god. He ordered the construction of a bridge between his palace and the Temple of Jupiter, so that he could meet with the deity. He also began appearing in public dressed as various gods and demigods such as Hercules, Mercury, Venus, and Apollo. Reportedly, he began referring to himself as a god when meeting with politicians and he was referred to as Jupiter on occasion in public documents. Caligula had the heads removed from various statues of gods and replaced with his own in various temples.

Another famous example of Caligula's eccentricity is the story of his horse, Incitatus. It is said that the emperor had such a fondness for the animal that he gave it its own house, complete with a marble stall and ivory manger. The oddest part of the tale is that Caligula apparently had plans to make Incitatus a consul: Shushma Malik and Caillan Davenport provide a detailed story.

The office of consul was the highest magistracy in the Roman Republic. Under the empire, the position still existed, though it was primarily an honorific office, which emperors used to reward loyal senators. On the subject of Caligula's horse, the ancient sources are unambiguous in their testimony: he was not made a consul.

The biographer Suetonius does, however, report that the emperor lavished gifts upon Incitatus, equipping him with a marble stall, ivory manger, purple blankets, luxurious furniture, and his own slaves. At the climax of this passage, Suetonius writes: "...it is also reported that he designated [Incitatus] to the consulship".