

# The emperor crying out for redemption

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Aloys Winterling

CALIGULA

A biography

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240pp. University of California Press.

£24.95 (US \$34.95).

978 0 520 24895 3

Published: 4 April 2012



“A Roman Emperor”, 1871, by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, showing the murder of Caligula and the proclamation of his successor

third of the Julio-Claudians, that spotting patterns in imperial behaviour becomes possible – along with the lingering sense that the Emperor was still feeling his way in unknown terrain. Augustus may have managed his posterity particularly well, but Tiberius flailed between restoring the free debate that characterized the Republic and retreating to a tyrant’s stronghold. The old problems had to be rehearsed anew: how to coexist with the elite while differentiating oneself, how to deal with the precedent of Julius Caesar’s deification and how to choose heirs from one’s extended family without being murdered by the rest. If the more resourceful aristocrats were phoney opportunists, so was the Emperor. He grabbed his chances, tested the waters, retreated, then reinvented himself all the way to his premature demise.

With Caligula, we have one new paradigm: the little princeps in waiting. “Bootikins” grew up in German army camps, but his perspective widened when he spent a year abroad on a grand tour of the stamping grounds of past tyrants – Lesbos, Athens, Sicily and Egypt. He saw modern-day rulers in the East whose subjects kissed their feet and worshipped them as gods, rulers who attracted more adulation than his austere great-uncle Tiberius. Some of those

D isgusted and unspeakably depressed, I walked out of the film after two hours of its 170-minute length.” The critic Roger Ebert famously hated the 1979 sadomasochistic porn fantasia *Caligula*. Appropriately enough: hatred was the primary emotion the real-life Emperor inspired in his Roman subjects – though walking out of his performance might cost them their lives. More importantly, hatred and revulsion are the emotions that float to the surface in later narratives of Caligula’s reign. The movie’s hardcore sex scenes may look like figments of the imagination of Gore Vidal (who wrote the original screenplay), but they are really blown-up Penthouse versions of scandals first promulgated by Seneca, Suetonius and Dio. “Let them hate me so long as they fear me” was Caligula’s notorious riposte, borrowed from a stage tyrant. His henchman Protogenes once hissed at an unctuous senator: “Why do you grovel to me when you hate the emperor so?”.

No Roman emperor cries out more obviously for redemption, but Aloys Winterling’s *Caligula*, a calm reassessment of his reign, avoids revisionist whitewashing and takes the residue of hatred as inescapable. How was it, he asks, that after two years this darling of the military and all Roman mothers, “Little Combat Boots” as his name meant, was so universally loathed? One answer might be that this was becoming the usual pattern for Roman emperors and their aristocratic subjects, once both parties had attempted and failed to renegotiate “the paradoxical combination of autarchy and republic” that constituted imperial rule. It is with Caligula,

subject kings ended up in Rome, nicknamed “tyrant-trainers”. It was Caligula’s openness to these Eastern models that gave him a bad name, though the venerating urge came originally from his subjects, not himself. His experiments were hardly novel, just more blatant. Caligula’s alleged attempt to bridge the Isthmus of Corinth, for example, harked back not only to Periander and Xerxes, stereotypical tyrants from Greece and Persia, but also to more recent Roman dynasts like Julius Caesar. To complicate matters, it is likely that Caligula’s reputation was later infected by the last Julio-Claudian, Nero, who not only set the mould for all bad emperors to come but fed the narrative of his predecessors’ lives too.

Caligula inherited from Tiberius an aristocracy in a state of paranoia. Even inanimate objects excited suspicion, from the false ceilings where informers lurked to the fruit that must be politely declined. Into this world his educators propelled a young emperor trained never to giggle, never to fall asleep. He was like a new building, Philo says, “destruction-proof”. But in no time he was shifting the foundations himself, raking up an old election ground to provide a lake for mock naval battles, turning his dead sister into an Eastern goddess and inviting nervous courtiers to adjudicate between himself and the statue of Jupiter Capitolinus. The stories became wilder. He started boasting that the moon goddess visited him in bed; he said he wished the Roman people had only one neck, all the tidier to sever.

The obvious conclusion was that the Emperor’s delusions of grandeur had tipped him into insanity, a theory that began with Suetonius and became entrenched thanks to the German historian and pacifist Ludwig Quidde, whose analysis of Caligula’s megalomania (published in 1894) was a thinly disguised attack on Kaiser Wilhelm II. For Winterling, the blame lies more with the immediate survivors of Caligula’s reign and their versions of the record. It was far easier to disown a deposed emperor for being mad than to admit complicity with his evil regime. While some truths elude Winterling’s earnest enquiries (“It cannot be verified whether Caligula’s feet were in fact enormous or whether he used a mirror to practice making horrible faces”), several of the crazier-seeming events can be comfortingly rationalized (“What went on in the young emperor’s mind in these days is not reported, but it is not difficult to imagine”) or reframed in the larger context of aristocratic mores. Thus Caligula’s sudden rush to Germany in ad 39 is explained as a perfectly sane attempt to stabilize the troops abroad following a domestic conspiracy, while his gift of a dinner service and a consulship to his own horse was a misunderstood joke on the restricted ambitions of the elite.

The idea of the emperor as satirist is a nice one, but it plays down the supremely alienating effect of these imperial transgressions. Winterling is particularly hard on Suetonius’s “montage technique”, his tendency to take literally the metaphors in what were meant as jokes. Yet the metaphors are a vital part of the picture. If the Emperor was exploring ways to increase his mystique and his distance from his aristocratic subjects, those subjects conspired in the fantasy: the monster in their midst, half god, half animal (no one could mention goats in Caligula’s presence, he was so hairy), could be both disavowed and endlessly transfigured. A shoemaker was once allowed to tell Caligula he talked humbug, but clothing the Emperor with fabulous layers of exotica had, for elite writers, become a tradition.

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