

Madness of caligula



Childhood Problems Leading to the Madness of Caligula

Imagine being born into a world of violence, betrayal, broken family, imprisonment, and utter misery. Then imagine having to harbor such atrocities and hardships internally with no time for remorse. One could say with certainty that such internal pain could lead to a whirl-wind of self destruction and violent tendencies later in life. This model best fits the Roman emperor Caligula. More often than not, when one hears of his name they recall the terrible atrocities he committed during his reign including acts of grotesque violence, lust, and insanity. For these reasons historians have portrayed Caligula as a mad man. This madness, however, did not suddenly overcome Caligula in a "brain-fever" during his time as emperor as early historians suggested occurred in 38 AD. New evidence has led one to believe that the madness that Caligula experienced was a result of a series of traumatic events over his life rather than a single event that occurred during his reign as Emperor. Using sources from both the past and present one will argue that Caligula's madness during his adulthood as emperor was set to detonate like a time bomb by his brutal past as a child.

In order to understand the synthesis of Caligula's madness one must explore his life leading up to the alleged illness that changed his behavior. Before he was known as Caligula, he was known as Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus. Gaius was born to Agrippina the Elder and Germanicus Julius Caesar in 12 CE. He also had several siblings that included his two brothers Nero and Drusus and his three sisters Drusilla, Julia Livia, and Agrippina the Younger. As a toddler Gaius marched with his father into several bloody campaigns in the territory of Germania. During the time Gaius spent marching on

campaigns in Germania with his father he wore child sized armor and boots. It was because of this particular attire Gaius wore that soldiers began to call the young boy Caligula meaning “miniature military boots (caliga).”[1]The name happened to stick with him for the rest of his life. Caligula’s family enjoyed a great deal of success in military campaigns in the north and his father was considered to be charismatic. His family, being descendent of the Julian Caesarian blood line, was also related to the late emperor Augustus who was replaced by Tiberius in 14 CE. This made Caligula the grandson of Tiberius and placed him in the advantageous position to inherit the throne. These happy times, however, were not long lived as a cloud of turmoil enveloped Caligula’s life.

Caligula’s father Germanicus, in an effort to further his popularity and expand control, began to visit Egypt regularly by 18CE. Word of Germanicus’ visits to the area were not received on good terms by Tiberius who began expressing hostility towards Germanicus. In response to this Tiberius appealed to Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, the governor of Syria, to prevent Germanicus from gaining power abroad. Together Tiberius and Piso conspired against Germanicus and, while in Syria, Germanicus fell ill due to poisoning by Piso. He died soon after in Antioch in the year 19 CE. Though it was never proven formally, it was known within the Roman public that Germanicus’ controversial death produced feelings of “hatred against Tiberius and Livia, and suspicions that they had plotted the murder along with Piso and his wife.”[2]This event was no doubt a traumatic one for the young boy Caligula. Caligula also remembered this moment with silent

reproach against Tiberius and waited patiently for revenge. This was only the beginning of a series of hardships Caligula was forced to endure.

After the death of his father, Caligula lived with his mother and siblings. Caligula's suffering, however, had just begun to escalate. Caligula's mother, Agrippina the Elder, brought grievances against Tiberius in Rome for his involvement in the murder of her husband Germanicus. Tiberius found her actions to be quite troublesome and quickly came up with a solution to be rid of her. To silence Caligula's mother, according to modern historian Peter Roberts, Tiberius had her tried for treason and then "banished to Pandataria Island off the Campanian coast where she died of starvation in 33." [3] Along with Agrippina, Tiberius also banished Caligula's Brother Nero. He also died in exile with his mother.

The deaths of Caligula's mother Agrippina and Brother Nero, however, were not enough to satisfy Tiberius' dominance over Roman politics. With growing fears of possible insurrection, Tiberius shifted his focus to Caligula's other brother Drusus who, infuriated by the death of his father, had begun to conspire against him. Tiberius had Drusus imprisoned and left him to die in the most horrid conditions. This particular account was documented in the annals of Tacitus. It stated that Drusus was starved in prison so severely that he had resorted to "chewing the stuffing from his bed," before his untimely death. [4] These horrific events scarred the young Caligula who by this point was only twenty-one years old.

Tiberius' actions lead one to believe that he was systematically tearing Caligula's family apart to prevent any and all opposition. Tiberius, feeling

that Caligula and his sisters were successfully scared into submission, kept them alive as prisoners. Surprisingly, Tiberius had Caligula educated and even took him under his personal care in 31 CE on the island of Capri. It seemed Caligula was spared by a stroke of luck. The brutal deaths of Caligula's close family members, however, certainly caused permanent psychological damage to Caligula and played a major role in shaping his actions later in life.

While these events were unfolding during Caligula's adolescence one can find evidence that he was experiencing the onset of mental instability. It was publicly known in Rome that Caligula adored his sister perhaps a little too much. One source stated that " He was caught in incest with his sister Drusilla while still in his teens." [5] This practice was considered neither normal nor virtuous in Roman custom during Caligula's age. The account leads one to believe that Caligula was developing habits considered to be socially deviant within his society. This evidence suggests two aspects about Caligula's life. First, it suggests that Caligula was experiencing social displacement. Second, it leads one to believe that Caligula may have been exhibiting signs of mental illness before the alleged disease " changed" him in adulthood in 38 CE. Therefore, one can conclude that early signs of Caligula's mental instability, demonstrated through his incestuous habits, occurred because of trauma from his childhood and began well before the alleged sickness changed him.

Incest was not the only warning of growing mental instability within Caligula. Many historians have noted that Caligula suffered from another mental illness that had affected him since his birth. Among the historians of

Caligula's time, Suetonius wrote of the condition Caligula suffered from in great detail. Suetonius stated that Caligula "as a boy he was troubled with the falling sickness [presumably epilepsy]." [6] Epilepsy may have played a major role in the onset of madness within Caligula. Although epilepsy is not directly linked to other mental disorders there is evidence that it is associated with behavioral problems. One medical source stated that epilepsy can cause traits of "irresponsibility and impaired impulse control, neglect of duties, self-interest, emotional instability, exaggeration, inconsiderateness, quick temper, and distractibility," and also includes "sleep deprivation." [7] Aggression and self interest are the apparent traits one finds in Caligula but it was also well known that he suffered from insomnia. [8] This evidence reveals that Caligula's mental stability may have been exacerbated or induced on account of his epileptic condition. The evidence also indicates that these problems were affecting Caligula well before he was emperor.

With emotional damage, incest, insomnia and an epileptic condition, it is clear that Caligula was plagued with many mental problems during his childhood that would follow him into adulthood. Caligula's mental instability, however, was suppressed in the presence of the emperor Tiberius whose violent tendencies Caligula came to fear. Caligula was by no means humbled by Tiberius' violent actions towards his family and he held a deep seeded resentment towards him. Caligula found within himself the strength to quell his rage in an effort to save himself and his sisters from being killed by Tiberius. This also meant Caligula had to silently obey Tiberius' every command in order to ensure his survival and the survival of his sisters.

Regarding this relationship Suetonius stated " There never was a better servant, nor a worse master." [9] From this evidence one can see the fragile nature of Caligula and Tiberius' relationship. It is important to note Caligula's obedience was probably due to fear of what Tiberius might do to his sisters if he refused. For the time being Caligula would have to wait until the right moment to strike back.

Over the course of time he spent with the emperor, Caligula had to keep his inner turmoil to himself while he closely observed Tiberius. In suppressing his boiling hatred and upholding a façade of humble obedience, Caligula manipulated Tiberius into giving him the honorary position of quaestor in 33CE. Caligula seemed for a time satisfied by his steady progress in gaining the honorary title of quaestor. Caligula's progress towards usurping Tiberius' power, however, was met with another emotionally traumatic event. In the same year Caligula gained the quaestorship his first wife, Junia Claudilla, died in childbirth. Caligula had again been dealt with an emotionally numbing blow, thus adding to his long list of psychological turmoil. Still, Caligula held himself together for the time being and waited for his opportunity to seize power from Tiberius.

After the death of his first wife, Caligula's temperance with Tiberius had begun to wear thin. Caligula's patience, however, paid off when Tiberius fell gravely ill in 37CE. To hasten Tiberius' death and prevent Tiberius' grandson Gemellus from seizing power Caligula conspired against them with his chamberlain Naevius Sutorius Macro. Together Caligula and Macro arranged for their assassination. One source sums this event up by stating " Macro, smothered Tiberius, and then arranged the killing of the next in line to

succeed Tiberius, a grandson named Gemmelus.”[10]With his revenge complete and Tiberius out of the way, Caligula took his position as Roman Emperor. His legacy as a ruler, however, was to be tainted by his brutal and psychologically troubled past.

Gaius Suetonius recollected that Caligula’s ascension to the throne was initially greeted with great expectations by the Roman public. He stated “ Amongst the people the remembrance of Germanicus’ virtues cherished for his family an attachment which was probably, increased by its misfortunes; and they were anxious to see revived in the son the popularity of the father.”[11]Suetonius’ account is evidence that Caligula’s initial popularity was garnered by the achievements of his father and the public sympathized with the misfortune of his family’s demise. What the Roman public did not realize was that Caligula’s psychological torment was a time bomb just moments from detonation.

Around the same time Caligula usurped the throne from Tiberius in 37CE he came down with a sudden illness. This was the illness that was considered by early historians to be the turning point in Caligula’s behavior from a somewhat even temperance to stark madness. Evidence of this type of thought comes from the writings of Suetonius and Dio Cassius. This event, however, is best described by modern historian Geoff W. Adams. Adams summed up this type of thought by stating “ Both Suetonius and Dio Cassius attribute [or at least infer] that the alteration of Gaius Caligula’s character occurred following from the illness he suffered during AD 38.”[12] This evidence leads one to believe that many early historians portrayed Caligula’s madness as a result of this disease. Given Caligula’s past, however, one

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cannot charge his madness to this single event. This illness was not the only agent involved in Caligula's behavioral change, but rather an amalgam of events beginning in his childhood. Therefore, contrary to the story conveyed by Suetonius and Cassius, the illness played a lesser role in Caligula's madness.

Although this disease is today considered to play a lesser role one cannot rule out that it may have certainly had some affect on Caligula. The mental conditions that existed prior could have been exacerbated by the illness that Caligula experience. Therefore, one concludes that Caligula's disease was significant but it should not be used to account for his madness. The series of traumatic and psychologically damaging events that occurred early in Caligula's life had only been made more acute by the illness Caligula contracted as Emperor. Caligula's madness only became more severe in the years after his illness.

After surviving the illness, Caligula resumed his rule as a more psychotic Roman Emperor. His mad legacy further revealed the psychological damage that was done unto Caligula during the course of his traumatic life. Most historians generally describe his rule as a period of violent, scandalous, insanity and rightfully so. Elements of Caligula's madness during his reign were reflected in his violent unpredictability, sexual promiscuity (including his sister whom he continued incestuous relations), and crude behavior towards his peers. At one point Caligula even tried to deify himself. Perhaps the most extreme evidence of madness was when Caligula's attempted appointment of his horse, Incitatus, to consul and priest. All of these events

created disdain among his people and eventually led to his death in 41CE at the hands of his own Praetorian Guard.[13]

Caligula's legacy has long been a topic focused on the insanity, violence, and scandal that occurred during his reign as emperor. When studying Caligula's reign, however, one can overlook the underlying causes of Caligula's madness. Caligula did not simply turn into an insane, violent, sexual deviant over night. It was rather a series of contingent events that led up to Caligula's increasing insanity and eventually led to his demise. This misconception can still be found today in the popular brain teasing game "Globetrotting Brainiac: 600 Historical Facts & Fun Trivia from Around the World" by Kaplan. In this game one of the cards states " Fact: In 37 CE, Caligula was diagnosed with ' brain fever' and soon thereafter began forcing many people including his father-in-law, to commit suicide." [14] The card suggests that Caligula somehow transformed suddenly into a mad tyrant. From the evidence provided in this essay, however, one can see how this ' fact' card somewhat misconstrued Caligula's madness as a sudden event that was a result of a single illness which occurred later in his life. Evidence such as this serves as a reminder that one should always ask questions and investigate when presented with material claiming to be ' fact.'

[1] Boatwright, Mary T. " A Brief History of the Romans" p. 203

[2] Barrett, Anthony A, " Caligula: The Corruption of Power" p. 15

[3] Roberts, Peter. " Excel HSX ancient history, Book 2." p. 162

[4] Tacitus, Cornelius, Translated by Woodman, John. " The Annals" p. 177

[5] Wells, Colin Micheal. “ The Roman Empire.” p. 108

[6] Tranquillus, Gaius Suetonius. “ The Lives of the Caesars: Caius Caligula [Easy read Large Edition]” p. 36

[7] Engel, Jerome, Pedley, Timothy A., Aicardi, Jean and Dichter, Marc A. “ Epilepsy: A Comprehensive Textbook, Volume 1” p. 2108

[8] Grant, Michael. “ Sick Caesars.” p. 34

[9] Tranquillus, Gaius Suetonius. “ The Lives of the Twelve Caesars Complete” p. 168

[10] Jeffers, H. Paul. “ History’s Greatest Conspiracies: One Hundred Plots, Real and Suspected, That have Shocked, Fascinated, and Sometimes Changed the World.” p. 193

[11] Tranquillus, Gaius Suetonius, Translated by Forester, Thomas. “ The Lives of the Twelve Caesars” p. 292

[12] Adams, Geoff W. “ The Roman Emperor Gaius ‘ Caligula’ and His Hellenistic Aspirations.” p. 150

[13] Richard, Carl J. “ Twelve Greeks and Romans who Changed the World” p. 208

[14] Howe, Randy. “ Globetrotting Brainiac: 600 Historical Facts & Fun Trivia from Around the World”