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Once Again Caligula's Illness

Author(s): M. Gwyn Morgan

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## Once Again Caligula's Illness

Though Katz and I agree in regarding Caligula's illness of 37 as purely physical, he has unfortunately failed to see the force of the two arguments I advanced. In the one case the fault is partly mine: I took it for granted that specific descriptions of Caligula's appearance would be seen as *prima facie* a safer guide to his physical state than general remarks on his character traits. So if the emperor had had bulging eyes (he did not), it would have been far easier to make the case for hyperthyroidism than it is by appealing to his insomnia (Suet. *Cal.* 50.3), that being an affliction capable of various explanations. Hence my first concern was to demonstrate that the descriptions of Caligula's appearance were not in fact reliable. My second point, more briefly, was that the ancient sources discern no major change in Caligula's behavior in 37, only in 39 if at all, and that to diagnose hyperthyroidism therefore requires a form of that illness which has a built-in, two-year delay-mechanism, not a very likely idea.

Let us turn now to Katz's restatement of his case. He now places all the emphasis on four character traits: restlessness, hyperkinesis, sleeplessness, and insatiable appetite in spite of thinness. It may be noted, first, that the last of these traits cannot properly be invoked. The "marked thinness" was limited to Caligula's neck and legs, whereas he was endowed with *corpore enormi* (Suet. *Cal.* 50.1), and thinness of leg was a trait he shared with his non-hyperthyroid father, Germanicus (*Cal.* 3.1). For that matter, it is doubtful whether he suffered constantly from an insatiable appetite. Philo, the only source to mention this, limits it to the period between Caligula's accession and his illness, listing it among the many causes of that illness (*leg.* 14). By contrast, Suetonius makes nothing of it, although an author ever ready to mention the eating habit of the Caesars (cf. *Jul.* 53; *Aug.* 76). Aside from a reference to Caligula's liking for expensive banquets (*Cal.* 37.1), the biographer says only that on the day of his murder Caligula was reluctant to go to lunch at about the seventh hour, since his stomach was still burdened by the excess of food he had eaten the day before (*Cal.* 58.1); and while this points to overeating, it is hardly evidence for an insatiable appetite.

Next, it may be asked whether the three remaining traits — restlessness, hyperkinesis, and sleeplessness — really *require* a medical explanation. Must one suffer hyperthyroidism to become restless, hyperkinetic and insomniac? And if we must resort to the explanation medical, is hyperthyroidism the sole possibility? A. T. Sandison, for example, found only the insomnia significant, commenting that "inveterate insomnia . . . may follow an attack of acute encephalitis" ("The Madness of the Emperor Caligula," *Medical History* 2 [1958] 207; cf. C. Wells, *Bones, Bodies and Disease* [New York 1964] 128f.) Nor should it be forgotten that Caligula's sexual activity, for which he was notorious a full five years before taking the throne (*Tac. Ann.* 6.9), fits very ill with hyperthyroidism, where "depressed sexual function, possibly impotence, is to be expected" (Katz 224). It is not enough to evince skepticism when we have Tacitean evidence on the matter.

This is not all. Katz begs two more questions, whether accession to the throne placed Caligula under intolerable strain, and whether that stress created a hyperthyroid condition. As he pointed out in his original paper (p. 225), "in man the relationship between hyperthyroidism and stress is not always evident," and the susceptible subject is "an inherently frightened personality thrust into situations beyond its capabilities." It is therefore essential for his argument that Caligula undergo a major change in behavior in 37. But as I have said, no such change is discerned by the sources. Nor is this surprising. For a start, Caligula was no stranger to stress; at age two he had been caught up in the mutiny of the legions in Germany, an incident which seems to have left some mark on him (Suet. *Cal.* 48.1); he had lived through a disturbed boyhood (*Cal.* 10.1); and on Capri he contrived to survive all the intrigue which swirled around him. It is completely misleading to talk of his "passive lethargic acceptance of the hazards of court life at Capri," and to use this as evidence for a "weak-willed personality" (Katz 225). Tacitus and Suetonius both emphasize that his guiding trait at this period was a cool and calculated interest in survival (*Ann.* 6.20; *Cal.* 10.2). Caligula, then, was just as tough-minded before 37 as he was thereafter, and (as I indicated in my first discussion) not much less unstable before 37 than he was afterwards. Again, there is no real reason to suppose that in a hierarchic and authoritarian culture like Rome's Caligula would have found it so very difficult to move from underling to master: both roles were clearly defined, and the one problem was to exercise moderation (precisely the point of Passienus Crispus' comment that "there was never a better slave or a worse master" — Tac. *Ann.* 6.20; Suet. *Cal.* 10.2). Obviously he will not have been totally unaffected by his change in status (cf. G. C. Moss, "The Mentality and Personality of the Julio-Claudian Emperors," *Medical History* 7 [1963] 165-75), but neither will it have disabled him. At most one could legitimately expect a great deal more self-indulgence on his part, and that is exactly what Philo describes (*leg.* 14).

A review of the evidence, in short, shows that a diagnosis of hyperthyroidism creates more problems than it solves. Whatever the cause of Caligula's illness, we may have to settle for the conclusion simply that the illness was serious (cf. R. Auguet, *Caligula ou le pouvoir à vingt ans* [Paris 1975] 77f.).

*University of Texas at Austin*

*M. Gwyn Morgan*

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