



The Language of Autocracy: A Statue of Gaius Caesar

In the whole course of human history, there have been few figures that can rival the notorious reputation of Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicusⁱ. According to ancient sources (which must of course be taken with a grain of salt), Caligula was either: insane, perverted, immature, terrified, megalomaniacal, sadistic or a combination of all of the aforementioned. Ruling just four years, he was murdered by his own guards and public displays of his memory were subsequently thrown down or modified (“damnatio memoriae”). Despite his reputation, the single surviving imperial statue of Caligula bears no indication of his infamous reign. As a vehicle for the authority of the Emperor and as a representation of the very state itselfⁱⁱ, an imperial statue is a generic political object and is separated from the character of the individual Emperor. The Statue of Caligulaⁱⁱⁱ represents a typical propaganda piece, composed of artistic elements meant to imply references to a great leader (Augustus) unto an audience programmed to consciously and unconsciously connect with these symbols. Utilizing two main schemes, the statue represents a mixture of the Augustan adaptation of Classical Greek form along with the traditional sculpture devices of the Roman Republic. References to Augustus, Caligula’s great-grandfather and the first Roman Emperor, are used to not only justify Gaius’ divine right to rule, but also to emphasize connections to a popular leader and to signify membership in an elite family (the Julio-Claudians were the Kennedy’s of the Ancient World). Republican images connect with historical the themes of oration and aristocratic position which were staples of the Republican government and set the Emperor up, not as a tyrant, but as the legitimate “leader of the Republic.”

After succeeding the unpopular Tiberius, Caligula made every effort to connect himself with his great-grandfather (Augustus Caesar^{iv}), who was extremely popular with the people and the Senate. Using imperial art was one way to accomplish this task; particularly by adopting

Augustus' image of the youthful, aristocratic ruler mandated by divine heritage^v. The statue's first goal is to identify Gaius with his *gens*¹ and his great-grandfather, Augustus. Following the idealized tradition that his great-grandfather borrowed from Classical Greece, many of Gaius Caesar's features are modified to make him look more like Augustus^{vi}. Such generalization produces stock physical features: his chin, large ears, broad forehead, deep-set eyes, and thin, protruding lips^{vii} all distinguish him as a Julio-Claudian, linking him with the family's immense array of famous and mythical figures (Aeneas, Julius Caesar, Augustus, etc.). Just as modern Americans identify with prominent family names, a Roman would identify the features of Caligula's statue with the family name, transferring the greatness of the Julian and Claudian clans onto Caligula himself.^{viii} By connecting with and asserting his aristocratic heritage, he affirms his right to govern Rome much in the same way as the preceding emperors, consuls, and dictators of the first century B.C.

In addition to highlighting Gaius Caesar's pedigree, his features also directly parallel him with Augustus Caesar. The statue goes beyond just imitating Augustus and strives to make a carbon copy of his more definitive features.^{ix} Along with the Classical bearing of the statue, the hair of the statue particularly links Gaius Caesar with Augustus, as the wavy style used is highly similar to statues of his great-grandfather, such as the Augustus Prima Porta^x. Flowing hair, in this case, implies a connection with the unspoiled nature possessed by the gods, especially Venus or youthful Apollo.^{xi} This Greek stylistic item was adopted by Augustus (who had thinning hair) when he was alive to suggest his partial divinity (through the story of Aeneas he claimed descent from Venus), much in the same way that Alexander the Great is portrayed in many of his statues. While seemingly just another trait copy, the idealized hair is a very significant detail as to what the statue of Gaius Caesar is projecting^{xii}. Due to the fact that Caligula was balding early in life,

¹ *Gens* (Latin) = Clan, or family line.

the idealized portrayal of his hair is due in part to vanity, but, more importantly, it can be attributed to his desire to be directly seen as Augustus's true successor by resemblance. The statue of Gaius is directly attempting to assume the same form of god-given beauty as his great-grandfather's works displayed by way of a resplendent hairdo.^{xiii} As such, Caligula would be immediately following the posthumously deified Augustus, as his "son-in-law" and therefore be divine himself by association^{xiv}. By placing himself in a direct line with Augustus, Gaius Caesar assumes his *numen* (divine command or will), not just from office as Tiberius portrayed it, but, rather, as his inheritance. Thus, the statue projects divine right to rule, by way of succession, as well as suggests, not only a mandate from the gods and Augustus Caesar, but quasi-divinity or perhaps even full divinity itself^{xv}

Gaius Caesar was the first of many Roman emperors to act in an openly autocratic fashion, ignoring the precedent set by Augustus of displaying adherence (publicly, at least) to the Senate and democratic traditions. Romans were vehemently opposed to kings and they required, in the least, a guise of representative government. Needing to modify his image from tyrant to "princeps", Caligula's statue incorporates the distinctly Republican symbols of orator and features highlighting family status to wrap him in Senatorial and Consular tradition. Oratory was an indispensable tool in Republican politics and was also important for the emperor's image in later times^{xvi}. Additionally, Gaius Caesar attempted to set himself up as the appropriately selected leader of a prestigious aristocratic body, such as Rome's senatorial class. While the stance of the statue copies the Classic Greek form, the posture, presumed location of the statue in the Theater of Marcellus and the scroll box at the emperor's feet portray Gaius Caesar as an orator. The statue's missing left arm possibly held a scroll (hence the box) and the right arm was probably extended in the "ad lucatio"^{xvii}, the typical hand signal that an orator used when he was

about to address a crowd (Ex. Aulus Metellus^{xviii}). Since Gaius Caesar himself was reputed to be a fairly skilled orator^{xix}, his portrayal is meant to connect him with the elected politicians of the Republican (who actually needed to make speeches) and to emphasize that he had attained the necessary maturity and political skill to hold his office (which he did not, in any way, possess). Gaius Caesar is also connecting with the Senate by projecting himself as an orator. The statue suggests that Caligula must present his points to the people and Senate and they, as his audience, have some determination as to his decisions^{xx}. Thus, Gaius Caesar is actually invoking a figurative plebiscite with the placement of the statue in a public forum, such as the Theater of Marcellus^{xxi}.

His garments are also geared to equate him with the “princeps” (first among equals) idea, informally used throughout the Republic and Early Empire. Caligula wears a patrician’s toga, evidenced by the minute traces of purple paint around the edges^{xxii} (possibly similar to the “Toga Praetexta”) as opposed to either a Toga Palmata or a Toga Picta². Hence, the statue of Caligula is directly adopting the dress of the Senate to make him seem like a peer rather than a ruler. By creating a more conservative display, the statue is toning down Caligula’s outrageous actions and public statements. Similarly, the statue has shoes which place it in more of a mundane setting (opposite of the barefoot Prima Porta) and the style of the boots also further emphasize that Gaius Caesar is a patrician and a member of Rome’s ruling class by merit of his birth.

Just like any political propaganda designated for autocratic rulers, the statue of Caligula serves to present a particular view to the Roman people, especially the elites of Roman society. Borrowing directly from Augustus’ program, the statue of Gaius Caesar attempted to mold the ruler as the true heir to the Julian tradition. With regards to the Imperial Cult, it makes efforts to attach Caligula to an apotheosized Augustus, in order to make Caligula appear more divine

² These were garments reserved for Emperors and triumphant generals.

himself. In addition to Classical Greek styling, Republican themes are used to portray a deference to traditions and representative government that was no longer a source of significant authority.

ⁱFagan, Garrett. "Caligula" *De Imperatoribus Romanis: An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors*. www.roman-emperors.org/gaius.htm Accessed 4/07/2005.

Caligula is Gaius Caesar's nickname meaning "little soldier's boots."

ⁱⁱ D'Ambra, Eve. "Roman Art" Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, ©1956. 43

ⁱⁱⁱ Barriault, Anne. "Selections: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts". Richmond: Office of Publication ©1992. 9

^{iv} Augustus was a title bestowed upon Gaius Octavius meaning "revered one".

^v Beard and Henderson. "Classic Art: From Greece to Rome" Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2001. 216.

^{vi} Ramage, Nancy H. and Andrew. "Roman Art: Romulus to Constantine" Englewood Cliffs, NJ : Prentice Hall, ©1991. 110.

^{vii} Barriault. 9.

^{viii} Much in the same way the Kennedy name almost guarantees a victory on Election Day.

^{ix} His features as far as public statues are concerned, not his actual appearance.

^x Stokstad, Marilyn. "Art History: Volume One." 2nd Edition. Pearson Education ©2005. 197

^{xi} This is almost a mirror reversal from the Republican style of adopting baldness to signify authority and service.

^{xii} Beard and Henderson. 222.

^{xiii} Resemblance was very important to the Romans; it suggests legitimacy and, in Caligula's and other cases, physical features that suggest physical resemblance also belie the hope of a character resemblance.

^{xiv} Emperors formerly adopted their successors or their successors had themselves adopted *post facto*.

^{xv} Claiming full living divinity was hubris in the Roman world. However, Caligula's own obsessions may have influenced the artist's portrayal away from suggesting simply partial divinity.

^{xvi} D'Ambra, Eve. 93.

^{xvii} If you account for its location and note other statues as a comparison, it is reasonable to make this interpretation.

^{xviii} Stokstad. 193.

^{xix} Tacitus, Publius Cornelius. "Annals of Imperial Rome" translated by Michael Grant. London: Penguin Books ©1996. 285

Although his account of the life of Caligula is lost, Tacitus, when discussing Nero's oratory skills, notes that "no other emperor found it necessary to speak with borrowed eloquence."

^{xx} This was far from reality, however.

^{xxi} As a modern parallel, Saddam Hussein had similar statues placed in public squares throughout Iraq.

^{xxii} Barriault. 9.