

CALIGULA AS VENUS (SUET. CALIG. 52)

Abstract: Suetonius and Dio agree that Caligula used to disguise himself as a variety of divinities, including Venus, but Aurelius Victor alone reports that he disguised himself as Venus while with his troops on the sea-shore at the English Channel. It is argued that the latter allegation may result from a misunderstanding of the ovation, or ‘triumph of Venus’, which Caligula celebrated at Rome for his alleged victory at the Channel, where the fact that he wore a crown of myrtle dedicated to Venus may have encouraged the belief that he had dressed as Venus at the Channel itself also.

Keywords: Caligula, Venus, clothing, Aurelius Victor, ovation

Suetonius begins his description of the dressing habits of the emperor Caligula by noting that he did not always follow conventional expectations, sometimes failing to dress as a Roman citizen, or as a male, or even as a mortal (Calig. 52). He then proceeds to explain what he means in more detail:

saepe depictas gemmatasque indutus paenulas, manuleatus et armillatus in publicum processit, aliquando sericatus et cycladatus, ac modo in crepidis uel coturnis, modo in speculatoria caliga, nonnumquam socco muliebri. plerumque uero aurea barba, fulmen tenens aut fuscinam aut caduceum {deorum insignia} atque etiam Veneris cultu conspectus est. triumphalem quidem ornatum etiam ante expeditionem assidue gestauit, interdum et Magni Alexandri thoracem repetitum e conditorio eius.¹

The claim that Caligula was often seen while holding a thunderbolt, trident, or caduceus effectively accuses him of imitating the gods Jupiter, Neptune, and Mercury. When one adds to this the claim that he was also seen in the dress of Venus, Suetonius records him disguising himself as four different divinities in total. While Suetonius does not himself offer an explicit explanation for Caligula’s behaviour in this matter, Philo is less reticent. He includes a list of similar disguises by Caligula as evidence that he wanted to be recognized as a living god, claiming that he began by dressing himself up as some semi-divinities – Heracles, the Dioscuri, and Dio-

1) Suet. Calig. 52. Ed. R. Kaster, C. Suetoni Tranquilli de Vita Caesarum Libros VIII et de Grammaticis et Rhetoribus Librum, Oxford 2016.

nysus (Leg. 79) – before then proceeding to disguise himself as the greater fully-divine beings – Hermes, Apollo, and Ares (Leg. 93). Finally, Dio (59.26.5–10) interprets Caligula's imitation of various divinities in similar fashion as evidence that he wanted to be recognized as a god, but names an even more extensive list of those imitated – Zeus, Poseidon, Heracles, Dionysus, Apollo, Hera, Artemis, and Aphrodite.

So what is one to make of Caligula's alleged behaviour in this manner? One possibility is that it had a serious religious purpose, and that he acted in this way in order to propagate a new understanding of the imperial cult, according to which he was compared to or assimilated with both male and female divinities in the manner of Hellenistic ruler cult.² The problem with this interpretation, however, is that contemporary non-literary evidence does not support it. In particular, Roman imperial coinage does not depict Caligula with the trappings of divinity or in divine disguise.³ This is all the more noteworthy considering that the reverse type of one of his *sestertii* does depict his three sisters, identified by name, with attributes proving them to be in the guise of three divine personifications – Agrippina as Securitas, Drusilla as Concordia, and Julia as Fortuna.⁴ Indeed, Caligula's coinage does not reveal any interest at all in most of the gods or goddesses as which he is supposed to have disguised himself, and the sole presence upon the coinage of one of this group – Poseidon or Neptune – is easily explained on grounds other than his wish to be assimilated to him.⁵

2) See H. Willrich, *Caligula*, *Klio* 3 (1903) 85–118, 288–317, 397–470, at 439–48; D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: A Commentary*, Brussels 1994, 339–40, also favours this explanation of his behaviour in some instances at least.

3) See e.g. A. Winterling, *Caligula: A Biography*, Berkeley 2011, 153 and J. Pollini, *From Republic to Empire: Rhetoric, Religion, and Power in the Visual Culture of Ancient Rome*, Norman 2012, 381–82, emphasizing this fact.

4) See RIC 1², nos 33, 41.

5) Apart from the depiction of Caligula's sisters as Securitas, Concordia, and Fortuna, the only other goddesses or female personifications to appear on his coinage were Victory (RIC 1², nos 2, 5), Pietas (nos 36, 44, 51), and Vesta (nos 38, 47, 54). The only god, excluding the deified Augustus, to appear on his coinage was Neptune (RIC 1², no. 58). He appears on the reverse of an as, the obverse of which depicts a bust of Agrippa, Caligula's maternal grandfather, wearing a rostral crown. In this context, the appearance of Neptune on the reverse was obviously intended in further allusion to Agrippa's two great naval victories at Naulochus in 36 BC and Actium in 31 BC.

A second possibility is that Caligula sometimes dressed as a god or goddess and attempted to force those around him to address him as if he really were that god or goddess, or greater than such, in an attempt to mock them, particularly the senate, for their general servility and fawning attempts to vote him ever greater honours that were more like what a Hellenistic ruler might have expected from his subjects than what a Roman magistrate, even the *princeps*, might have expected from the senate or other bodies.⁶ This interpretation is certainly consistent with Caligula's cruel and biting sense of humour and general disrespect both for god and man.⁷ Furthermore, it is supported by the fact that Dio (59.26.5) draws a causal connection between the behaviour by some in praising him as a demigod or god and his decision to disguise himself as such. Against it, however, one wonders at the sheer array of gods or goddesses that he is supposed to have imitated. It might have seemed funny to mock senators in this way once or twice, but to disguise himself as so many gods or goddesses suggests that Caligula repeated the same joke over and over again long after it had lost any real humour, novelty, or capacity to shock, and it is hard to believe that Caligula was the sort of person to have been satisfied repeating what was essentially the same dull old routine.

A third possibility is that Caligula sometimes disguised himself as a divinity in his efforts as an actor or pantomime, so that he may have played the parts of all or most of the aforementioned divinities in various different dramatic productions over time, even if these were only private performances still.⁸ He had developed a passionate interest in singing and dancing by the time of his stay on Capri under Tiberius (Suet. Calig. 11), and immediately after his accession he recalled the dancers banished from Rome by Tiberius (Dio 59.2.5). According to Philo (Leg. 42–45), one of the reasons for the downfall of the praetorian prefect Macro was that he tried to restrain Caligula's obvious enthusiasm for dance, mime, and theatre. Yet his interest increased to the point that he was even alleged

6) See A. Starbatty, *Aussehen ist Ansichtssache: Kleidung in der Kommunikation der römischen Antike*, Munich 2010, 218–24; Winterling (n. 3 above) 153–54.

7) On his cruel humour, see Suet. Calig. 29, 32–33. As Wardle (n. 2 above) 253 notes, “a black, sarcastic sense of humour emerges”.

8) See e.g. J. Bellemore, *Gaius the Pantomime*, *Antichthon* 28 (1994) 65–79; Pollini (n. 3 above) 377–79.

to have been considering making his first appearance upon a public stage when he was assassinated in January AD 41 (Suet. Calig. 54.2). He is also said to have had an affair with the pantomime Mnester, and included the famous tragic actor Apelles among his companions and advisors, until he had him killed on some unknown charge.⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that Philo twice specifically compares Caligula's imitations of the gods to theatrical performances (Leg. 79, 111). The main advantage of this theatrical explanation is that it would explain Caligula's apparent willingness to imitate female as well as male divinities, since it was normal for male actors to play the parts of female characters in the Roman theatre.

Finally, there is the possibility that he often disguised himself as a divinity not as part of a new religious policy, nor to mock the senate, nor even as part of a dramatic performance, but simply because he enjoyed doing so.¹⁰ Attention has often been drawn in this context to the allegation that the young Augustus had once dressed up as Apollo at a feast where all the guests disguised themselves as gods or goddesses.¹¹ It is possible, therefore, that Caligula disguised himself as a large variety of gods or goddesses as he attended a variety of similar such feasts over the several years of his rule, beginning perhaps as Jupiter or Apollo but finally having to disguise himself as Hera or Artemis as he strove not to repeat his earlier costumes.

Since the sources preserve very little evidence concerning the exact circumstances of Caligula's imitation of the various divinities mentioned above, it is tempting to assume that the one explanation probably explains all or most of these incidents. In reality, however, the manner in which these sources have grouped the various incidents together thematically likely conceals a variety of different motives and explanations. As far as the imitation of the female divinities is concerned, Josephus (AJ 19.30) preserves some information of possible relevance, when, in his description of the manner

9) On Mnester, see Suet. Calig. 36.1; Dio 60.22.4. On Apelles, see Suet. Calig. 33; Philo, Leg. 204–6.

10) As A. A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Abuse of Power*, 2nd ed., London 2015, 196 says, “Caligula undeniably had a predilection for dressing up”, although he goes too far when he also refers to “Caligula's possible penchant for transvestism”.

11) Suet. Aug. 70. See e.g. Wardle (n. 2 above) 340; Winterling (n. 3 above) 149–50; Barrett (n. 10 above) 196.

in which Caligula used to tease Cassius Chaerea, a tribune of the praetorian guard and his eventual assassin, for alleged effeminacy, he criticizes his hypocrisy in this matter by noting that he himself used to don women's clothes and use wigs and other means to look female when he participated in the rites of certain mysteries which he had organized.¹² However, this passage does not actually state that Caligula disguised himself as a goddess at these rites, and the most plausible explanation is that it is a generalizing reference to some occasion when Caligula acted in the manner of P. Clodius in 62 BC. Clodius disguised himself as a woman in order to enter Julius Caesar's house during the celebration of the rites of Bona Dea, not so much to participate in the rites themselves, but to conduct his affair with Caesar's wife Pompeia, or so it was alleged.¹³ It is not hard to imagine Caligula behaving in a similar manner in pursuit of one of his affairs, not so much because he was afraid of the affair being discovered, but because it added to the thrill of the chase.¹⁴

Dio (59.26.8–9) preserves some rare insight into one particular example of Caligula's imitation of a god when he describes how a Gallic cobbler once broke into laughter upon seeing Caligula disguised as Zeus uttering oracles from a tall platform. However, Caligula did nothing to harm the cobbler, even when, questioned upon what he saw, he said "A fool!". Dio explains the man's escape unharmed on the basis that he was only a cobbler, the implication being that Caligula could afford to ignore an insult from someone of such low social status. Yet Caligula was not usually so generous, and the suspicion must be that Dio, or his source, has misunder-

12) If one takes the claim that Caligula had organized these mysteries at all seriously, then this is likely to be a reference to some new ritual in honour of his beloved sister Drusilla who died on 10 June AD 38. Among other honours bestowed upon her, he deified her and erected a shrine in her honour at Rome (Dio 59.11.2–3). While his grief might have prevented him from desecrating such a ritual at the start, his behaviour may have become less respectful as time passed.

13) In general, see D. Mulroy, *The Early Career of P. Clodius Pulcher: A Re-Examination of the Charges of Mutiny and Sacrilege*, TAPA 118 (1988) 155–78, at 165–78. Following Mulroy on Clodius, one may doubt whether Caligula would really have been able to pass himself off as a woman either, but it is unlikely that anyone present would have dared to challenge him.

14) On Caligula's affairs, see Suet. *Calig.* 36; Philo, *Leg.* 14; Dio 59.25.5a. The only noble woman specifically identified by the sources in this respect was the wife of Valerius Asiaticus, Lollia Saturnina (*Sen. Const.* 18.2).

stood the real significance of this incident. Given that Caligula spared a man who had not only laughed at him, but had called him a fool also, the obvious interpretation is that he did so because the man's behaviour pleased him, that is, because he had wished to be laughed at and called a fool, and the most plausible explanation for this is that he was acting the part of Zeus in some comedy at the time, and so took such behaviour as praise of his ability as an actor rather than as criticism of his behaviour as emperor.¹⁵ In this instance, therefore, the idea that Caligula's imitation of the gods can be explained on the basis of his love of performance seems to work well.

Writing c. AD 360, Aurelius Victor preserves some insight also into another occasion when Caligula is supposed to have imitated a divinity, but this time the goddess Venus rather than Jupiter:

*Quin etiam sororum stupro ac matrimoniis illudens nobilibus deorum habita incedebat, cum Iovem se ob incestum, ex choro autem Bacchanali Liberum assereret. Neque secus contractis ad unum legionibus spe in Germaniam transgrediendi conchas umbilicosque in ora maris Oceani legi iussit, cum ipse nunc fluxu cultu Venerioque interesset, nunc armatus spolia a se non ex hominibus, sed caelestium capi dicitaret, scilicet quod huiuscemodi pisces Graecorum dicto, quis augendi omnia studium est, Nympharum lumina accepisset.*¹⁶

The claim that Caligula went about dressed in the flowing robes of Venus while on the beach with his soldiers during his visit to the English Channel in early AD 40 is not supported by any of the other surviving sources for this famous event, but that is not particularly surprising.¹⁷ In the case of Suetonius' account of this event (Calig. 46), it is not surprising that he omits this detail because he customarily omits details from an anecdote included within one thematic section in order to include these elsewhere instead.

15) Winterling (n.3 above) 161–62 suggests that this incident reveals that Caligula was “appearing as a god at occasional public performances to expose the senators’ fearful and at the same time hypocritical submissiveness towards him in all its absurdity” and “did so before an audience of commoners who could not help laughing at the antics of the nobly born”.

16) Aur. Vict. Caes. 3.10–12. Ed. F. Pichlmayr, *Sexti Aurelii Victoris Liber de Caesaribus*, Leipzig 1966, 80. On Victor's work, see W. den Boer, *Some Minor Roman Historians*, Leiden 1972, 19–113, esp. 31–35.

17) For a good summary of the modern debate concerning the significance, and details, of Caligula's visit to the English Channel, see Barrett (n. 10 above) 180–85.

For example, he concludes his description of Caligula's dressing habits by noting that he sometimes wore the breastplate of Alexander the Great. As it happens, the only occasion that Caligula is known to have done this was on his outwards journey across the bridge of boats which he had built between Bauli and Puteoli, so that this also seems to be an example of Suetonius' habit of generalizing on the basis of one incident.¹⁸ More importantly, it is only Dio (59.17.3) who records this detail in his description of this event, not Suetonius (Calig. 19), because the latter reserves it for the section on dressing habits instead. In like manner, therefore, Suetonius probably omits the detail of Caligula's disguising himself as Venus while at the English Channel because he wants to include it in the section on his dressing habits instead. This naturally raises the question as to why Dio does not record this detail either, and the answer to this must be that his text does not survive in full in this instance. Instead, one is forced to rely on an epitome by the 11th century Byzantine historian Xiphilinus, and this detail must be assumed to be one of those lost due to the very nature of an epitome.

So why did Caligula wear the flowing robes of Venus while mingling with his troops on the beach at the English Channel? Is it significant that he seems to have ordered the troops to gather seashells while he was so dressed, all the time declaring that he was taking spoils not from men, but from the gods? One potential explanation may lie in the alleged origin of Venus, or Aphrodite 'foam-arisen' to call her by her Greek name, according to which she was formed after the genitals of Uranus were cast into the sea, and then carried to shore on a scallop shell.¹⁹ So it is possible that Caligula may have participated in some sort of religious ritual in her honour at the sea-shore, or have staged some sort of drama in honour of her birth given the location. Against this, however, one notes that any ritual or drama commemorating her birth would have required Venus to be naked, and that was one role that no

18) As to the significance of Caligula's decision to wear this breastplate, he was probably imitating Pompey the Great imitating Alexander the Great rather than imitating Alexander directly. See D. Woods, *Caligula, Pompey, and Alexander the Great*, *Eranos* 104 (2007) 120–33.

19) Augustus placed a famous painting of Venus emerging from the sea by Apelles of Kos in the temple of Julius Caesar at Rome (Pliny, *NH* 35.91).

male actor could easily play, not even Caligula. Another potential explanation may lie in the tradition of dedicating spoils of pearls to Venus. Julius Caesar had dedicated a cuirass made of British pearls to Venus Genetrix in her temple at Rome following his triumph in 46 BC, and Augustus had decorated the statue of Venus in the Pantheon with a pair of pearl earrings in 26 BC.²⁰ If one believes that the seashells allegedly collected as spoils at the Channel are somehow symbolic of pearls, even if they may not actually have contained pearls themselves, then it is fitting that Caligula should have dressed as Venus while boasting of his seizure of these ‘spoils’, since, as just demonstrated, pearls were among the types of spoil traditionally associated with her.²¹ In this manner, it seems possible that Caligula may have been staging some form of performance wherein the soldiers played themselves and he played the goddess Venus receiving the ‘spoils’ from them, an anticipation perhaps of their eventual victory over Britain after which he and his forces expected to have rich spoils, including pearls, to dedicate to Venus in Rome once more.

The greatest difficulty with the two potential explanations just outlined is that they both require Caligula to have acted in a manner – dressing up as goddess – that would have been regarded as unworthy of anyone of his status, and certainly of any soldier, and have utterly disgraced him before his troops. After all, it was one thing to perform in private to a select audience of nobles at Rome, another to do so before provincial troops with a very different set of values and expectations. It was one thing for troops to have perhaps heard some slight rumour that the emperor behaved in this fashion, and another to have had this rumour confirmed by their own eyes. So Caligula’s behaviour in this manner would have been inconsistent with the main purposes of his so-called northern

20) Pliny, NH 9.116,121.

21) On the sea-shells as symbolic of pearls, see M. B. Flory, *Pearls for Venus*, *Historia* 37 (1988) 498–504; J. G. F. Hind, *Caligula and the Spoils of the Ocean: a Rush for Riches in the Far North-West?*, *Britannia* 34 (2003) 272–74; F. Gury, *Les perles et les imperatores: Caligula in litore Oceani*, in: J. Napoli (ed.), *Resources et Activités Maritimes des Peuples de l’Antiquité*, Boulogne 2008, 401–26. However, the identity and purpose of these sea-shells has been strongly contested. See e.g. D. Woods, *Caligula’s Sea-Shells*, *G&R* 47 (2000) 80–87 arguing that Caligula had originally used the relevant term in derogatory reference to British ships captured in the Channel.

expedition, which were partly to stamp his personal authority on the troops of the region following the alleged conspiracy of Lentulus Gaetulicus, governor of Germania Superior, and partly to reorganize the regional forces in support of a planned invasion of Britain, the purpose of which was to cement the loyalty of Roman forces everywhere by proving himself a *vir militaris* worthy of the position of *princeps*. For these reasons, therefore, one needs to consider the possibility that the tradition recorded by Aurelius Victor, and probably by one of Suetonius' sources also, that Caligula dressed as Venus while on the sea-shore at the English Channel, is incorrect.

While one cannot totally exclude the possibility that the claim that Caligula dressed as Venus while on the sea-shore at the English Channel is pure fabrication, it is perhaps more plausibly explained as the result of a genuine misunderstanding of some element of his behaviour in the context of a general belief that nothing would have been too outrageous for him. Furthermore, the fact that he was claimed to have imitated Venus while at the English Channel suggests that it was something that he said or did during or shortly after this event in particular that caused this misunderstanding. As one reviews the events of this period, one stands out as offering strong potential for a misunderstanding such as required here, the celebration by Caligula of an ovation following his return to Rome from the north (Suet. Calig. 49.2). One of the features distinguishing an ovation, or lesser triumph, from a triumph proper was the fact that the triumphant general wore a wreath of myrtle rather than of laurel, where this was regarded as sacred to Venus. According to Pliny (NH 15.125), Publius Postumius Tubertus, the first to enter Rome in an ovation, had been crowned with the myrtle of Venus Victrix, and it had remained the custom since to wear a crown of myrtle rather than of laurel. According to Gellius (NA 5.6.22), this was because the ovation celebrated victory in such circumstances that it was better characterized as 'a triumph of Venus' (*quasi Venerius quidam triumphus*) rather than of Mars. So when Caligula entered Rome in ovation on his birthday (31 August) in AD 40 (Calig. 49.2), he would probably have worn a crown of myrtle sacred to Venus, and some of those describing the event subsequently may well have described it as a 'triumph of Venus' in explanation of this feature of the ceremony. Furthermore, if Caligula had indulged his taste for colourful or richly adorned

clothing while celebrating his ovation, clothing regarded as effeminate by normal Roman standards, this could have encouraged the belief that he was also wearing the clothing of Venus.²²

Any description of Caligula parading in celebration of a 'triumph of Venus' adorned with the crown of Venus could easily have been misunderstood by a reader less knowledgeable about the history of the ovation and the characteristics distinguishing it from the triumph proper. The obvious temptation would have been to misinterpret all this to mean that Caligula was playing the part of Venus as he paraded in triumph, particularly if he also wore what seemed to be effeminate clothing also. Next, if the commander played the part of Venus while celebrating a triumph, this could have encouraged the belief that he had also played the part of Venus during the events for which he was celebrating the triumph. It is not clear what exactly Caligula celebrated by means of his ovation in August AD 40, whether this was the first ovation which the senate had awarded him in AD 39 following his restoration of treason trials (Dio 59.16.11), the second ovation which it had awarded him for his defeat of the alleged plot of Lepidus and Gaetulicus later that same year (Dio 59.23.2), or a third for his recent activities in Germany and on the English Channel. However, the fact that he had sent some barbarian captives and refugees from northern Gaul to Rome for a triumph there (Suet. Calig. 47), where the latter group surely included the British prince Adminius whom Caligula had received while in the north (Suet. Calig. 44.2), combines with his dispatch of the triremes by which he had entered the English Channel to Rome also, to suggest that this ovation had probably been intended to celebrate his recent activities on the English Channel in particular. In this way, Caligula could have been assumed to have played the part of Venus while at the English Channel, just as he did while celebrating the ovation subsequently for his alleged victory there.

22) For some idea as to what Caligula thought fitting to wear on festive occasions of a military nature, one notes that he wore a purple cloak of silk decorated with gold and precious stones on his outwards journey across the bridge of boats from Bauli to Puteoli (Dio 59. 17.3), and a tunic with gold embroidery on the return journey (Dio 59.17.5). The former is probably the same bejewelled cloak as described at the start of Suet. Calig. 52.

It is my argument, therefore, that the claim that Caligula sometimes disguised himself as Venus is a generalizing claim based on a single severely misinterpreted incident, his wearing of a crown of myrtle sacred to Venus during his ovation on 31 August AD 40. The same explanation cannot work for the claims that he disguised himself as various other divinities also, but there is no reason why the one explanation should solve all of these problems. The difference in this case is that Aurelius Victor provides just enough contextual information to enable a more productive analysis of the problem.

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