

“ S U E T O N I U S A N D
T A C I T U S

MISERY, MISTRUST, MADNESS, AND MURDER

THE SUCCESSORS OF AUGUSTUS

“ S u e t o n i u s , *Life of Claudius*,
130 CE

My dear Livia,
As you suggested, I have discussed with Tiberius what we should do about your grandson Claudius. . . . The question is this: does Claudius have—shall I say—full command of his senses? . . . If he turns out to be physically or mentally handicapped, the public must not be given the chance to laugh at him . . . or at us.

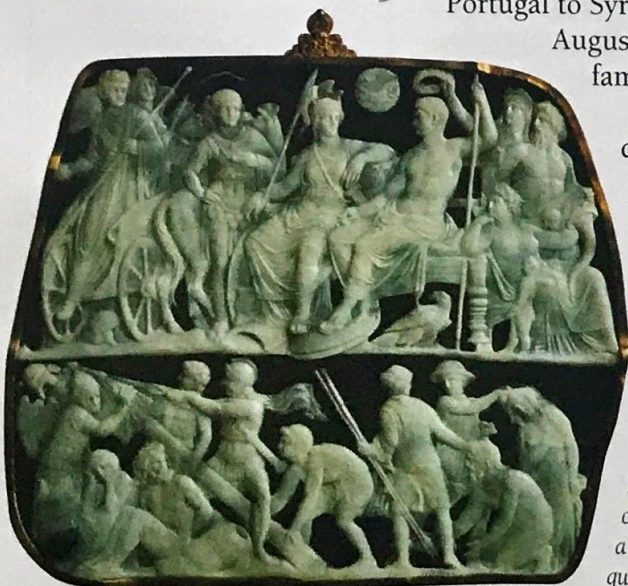
The biographer Suetonius records this letter written by the emperor Augustus to his wife, Livia. Augustus was thinking ahead—far ahead. He had already named his stepson Tiberius as his **successor**, but he wanted to choose Tiberius’s successor, too. By the end of Augustus’s reign, the Roman Empire stretched from modern-day Portugal to Syria and from the English Channel to Egypt.

Augustus desperately wanted to keep all of it in family hands.

Because all of his own grandsons had died, Augustus turned to Livia’s children and grandchildren from her first marriage in his search for successors. Livia’s grandson Claudius was a possible choice, but the emperor was prejudiced toward him. Claudius had suffered from polio in his early years, and the disease left him with a limp, a stutter, and an obvious twitch.

In the top scene of this cameo, Tiberius steps from his chariot to greet Augustus and the goddess Roma (wearing a helmet). Below, Roman soldiers capture foreigners conquered in battle.

“Successor” and “succeed” come from the Latin words *sub* (after or under) + *cedere* (to go). A successor follows, goes next. “Succeed” can mean “to follow” or “to do well.”



ROMAN EMPIRE AT
THE DEATH OF AUGUSTUS, 14 CE

He often had terrible stomach pains, he sometimes laughed uncontrollably, and he got a runny nose when he was angry. His physical problems, combined with his tendency to daydream, convinced Augustus that Claudius would not make a good emperor. Augustus and Tiberius talked about it and agreed not to give the young man any official duties. They decided that he should never take part in public ceremonies—he might embarrass the family.

Augustus had resisted naming Tiberius as his successor, and Tiberius resented it. The two weren’t particularly fond of each other. Augustus found his stepson a gloomy fellow—quiet and sullen. The emperor was also impatient with his stepson’s odd ways. Perhaps it bothered him that Tiberius loved his pet snake so much that he took it with him everywhere, even when he traveled. According to Suetonius, Tiberius sometimes had acne, and he was left-

☞ Suetonius, *Life of Tiberius*,
130 CE

handed, which some people thought were bad signs. But in many ways, he was a good choice.

Tiberius was strongly and heavily built, and of above average height. . . . His body was perfectly proportioned from top to toe. His left hand was . . . so strong that he could poke his finger through a newly-plucked apple or into the skull of a boy or young man.

When Augustus died in the year 14, Tiberius came grudgingly to the throne. Even with a permanent chip on his shoulder, he ruled well—at first. He believed in free speech, refusing to punish people who spoke against him. He was careful with public money and left the Roman treasury 20 times larger than when he came to power.

But as the years passed, Rome's second emperor became more and more suspicious of the people around him. He listened to the gossip of malicious men who filled his ears with stories of hidden enemies and secret plots. The emperor believed the lies he heard and ordered the executions of many innocent men. In the end, no one in Rome felt safe. A person could be suddenly arrested and killed—yet never know the reason why. Everyone wondered who would be next.

Like Augustus, Tiberius wanted to choose his own successor. After his nephew and son both died mysteriously—probably poisoned—Tiberius abandoned Rome. He moved to the island of Capri and left the government in the hands of his friend and advisor, Sejanus—the only man in the world whom Tiberius still trusted.

But Tiberius had chosen badly. Sejanus was a traitor. He worked against his emperor and later led bloody persecutions against the descendants of the great Augustus. When Tiberius discovered the truth about Sejanus, he was terrified. He feared that the Praetorian Guard, commanded by his former friend, might rise up against him. So he hinted—aloud—that he might adopt Sejanus as his successor. It was a trick, and it worked. Sejanus grew both proud and careless. Tiberius waited for the right moment, then secretly replaced Sejanus as commander of the Guard. He then ordered his former ally executed.

RIGHT IS RIGHT, LEFT IS SINISTER

In Rome, as in many ancient cultures, “left-handedness” was believed to be unlucky. The Latin word for the left hand is *sinister*, which in English means evil or unfortunate. The opposite of *sinister* is *dexter*—the right hand or right side. Birds flying in the right-hand side of the sky promised good luck . . . on the left, bad luck. Someone who is “dexterous” is skillful or agile.

Near the end of his life, Tiberius adopted his great-nephew Gaius as his successor. Gaius was eager to rule—so eager, it was whispered, that he murdered his uncle with a slow-acting poison. The murder charge was never proved, and in 37 CE Gaius became the third emperor of Rome.

As a boy, Gaius had lived among his father's troops in Germany and was always dressed as a miniature soldier. Papa dressed him in tiny military boots. This practice earned Gaius the nickname Caligula, which means “Little Booties.”

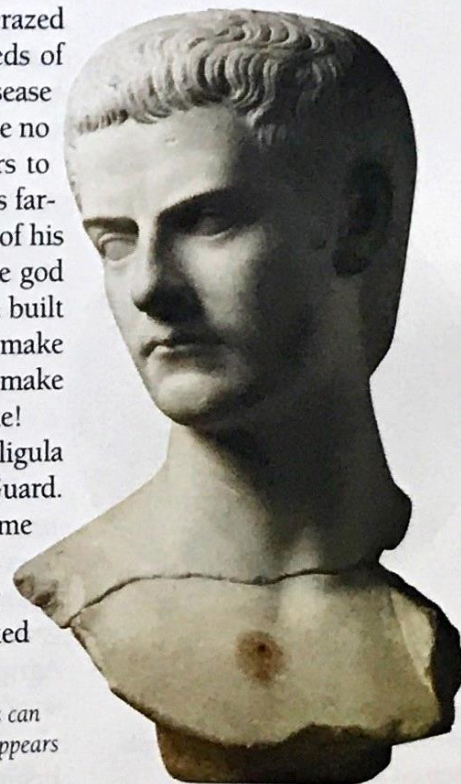
Because he was the great-grandson of much-loved Augustus, Caligula was popular in the early months of his reign. For a while, he ruled well: he reduced taxes and put on many public entertainments for the people. But, in the words of his biographer, Suetonius, Caligula changed completely after those early years. “So much for Caligula the Emperor,” writes Suetonius, “the rest of this history must deal with Caligula the Monster.”

How did this popular young man become a crazed tyrant? This mystery has puzzled scholars for hundreds of years. The strongest theory is that he had a brain disease that drove him insane. Whatever the cause, there can be no doubt: Caligula was a madman. He murdered senators to steal their property or take their wives. He gave Rome's far-away provinces to his boyhood pals. He married three of his sisters and insisted that the people worship him as the god Jupiter. He was so fond of his horse, Incitatus, that he built him a marble stable with an ivory stall. He planned to make Incitatus a consul but was assassinated before he could make the appointment official. Imagine: a horse in the Senate!

Understandably, the Senate was relieved when Caligula was assassinated by officers in his own Praetorian Guard. After his terrible reign, many people argued that Rome should forget about emperors and go back to being a republic. But the military leaders disagreed. Their power was greater under the emperors, so they insisted

Caligula had just come to power when this bust was sculpted. Scholars can name 37 CE as its date because his image is almost identical to what appears on coins minted in that year.

☞ Suetonius, *Life of Caligula*,
130 CE



on finding a successor to Caligula. The problem was who? There was almost no one left in the imperial family—except Caligula’s bumbling old uncle, Claudius. But where was Claudius? No one knew.

According to Suetonius, when news came that Caligula had been assassinated, Claudius was afraid that he would be killed, too. There was no time to escape, so he hid behind some curtains in the **palace**. An observant soldier spotted his feet beneath the drapes and dragged him out, thinking he was a prowler. By chance, someone recognized him and, within a day, Claudius was acclaimed the fourth emperor of Rome.

This was the limping, stuttering grandson about whom Augustus had written in his letter to Livia. Because of Claudius’s disabilities, the imperial family had mostly ignored him. He wasn’t very interested in politics, so he was allowed to go his own way—free to study history and write books. Although Tiberius and Caligula had murdered other members of the family, Claudius quietly survived. No one bothered to kill him. He was harmless and a bit feeble-minded. Wasn’t he?

Actually, Claudius was very bright. As a young man, he studied with the great historian Livy and learned Etruscan, a complicated language that no one spoke by his time. Although he wrote his autobiography and a history of Rome in Latin, his 20-book history of the Etruscans was written in beautifully polished Greek—the language of high art. Unfortunately, all of these works are now lost.

Claudius ruled Rome very well for 13 years. He established a strong system of government and successfully invaded Britain. He gave citizenship to Roman subjects in faraway provinces and welcomed their representatives in the Senate. He passed laws requiring more lenient treatment of slaves. He was smart, except when it came to women—and there, he was very foolish. His fourth wife, Agrippina, poisoned him to make sure that her son Nero would inherit the throne.

Claudius’s stepson, Nero, was 17 when he became the first teenaged emperor of Rome. The Romans welcomed his

“Palace” comes from the Latin word *palatium*, since the emperors lived in the imperial mansion on the Palatine Hill in Rome.



This coin shows Nero looking pudgy, self-centered, and self-satisfied. He had already lost the image of the promising young emperor who would do great things for Rome.

reign and believed that he would bring a new “golden age.” For a while, it looked as if that might be true. During his first five years, Nero modeled himself on Augustus. He attacked corruption in government and returned power to the Senate. He made careful decisions in matters of law and government. It was a good start, but—like Tiberius and Caligula—Nero soon lost his way. Nero became more interested in performing on stage than ruling the Roman Empire. He loved singing more than anything else, and he craved applause. Nero sang at Greek festivals and won more than a thousand gold crowns for his performances. (In ancient times, performers or contest winners received crowns of victory, just as modern Olympic victors win gold medals.)

The spectacle of a singing emperor delighted the Greeks but disgusted the Romans. Nero’s mother, Agrippina, agreed with the Romans. When she criticized her son’s new passion for singing and performing, the emperor decided to murder her by sending her off in a boat that had a hole in it. The boat sank, but Agrippina swam ashore. Nero then hired a professional assassin to finish the job. Three years later, Nero also had his wife killed so that he could marry someone else.

Nero built an enormous new residence called the Golden Palace. Its entry hall featured a 120-foot-tall statue of the emperor himself, and its main corridor was a mile long. Nero spared himself nothing. He loved luxury, adored clothes, and refused to wear any outfit more than once. During his reign, no one else was allowed to wear purple—it was the imperial color. The emperor amused himself by playing the lyre, writing poetry, and racing chariots. Pleasure was his god. Cruelty was his style. One of his favorite “games” was disguising himself as a criminal, then going into the night to ransack shops and kill innocent people.

In July of 64 CE, a fire broke out and quickly spread across Rome. The damage was terrible, and the area around the imperial palace burned. Although Nero allowed his own gardens to be used as shelters and ordered a shipment of grain to feed the fire victims, he never received credit for these good deeds. The word in Rome was that Nero had

HUNGRY FOR APPLAUSE

The emperor Nero was so devoted to singing that he refused, for a time, to eat apples, because he believed they would damage his vocal cords. At times, he only ate chives marinated in oil, claiming that this was good for the voice.

started the fire himself. His enemies charged that he played the lyre and sang while the city burned. They claimed he did it so that he could rebuild his palace in grandeur without other, lesser buildings crowded around it. This tale is the source of an often-repeated phrase: “Nero fiddled while Rome burned.”

Nero probably did not set the fire himself. But he did shamefully neglect the military. Finally the troops rebelled and chose a new emperor. When Nero heard that the armies had reached Rome, he committed suicide. As he thrust himself against a sword, he cried: “How great an artist dies in me.”

The four emperors who succeeded Augustus—Tiberius, Claudius, Caligula, and Nero—lived in his shadow. None ever felt secure on the throne. Their reigns were a pitiful parade of misery, mistrust, madness, and murder. In the end, the army turned away from the dynasty that had originally brought peace and prosperity to Rome. The horrible years after Augustus’s death convinced many people that hereditary rule was a dangerous thing.

Civil war returned to Rome after Nero’s suicide. One general after another marched on the capital city. In 69 CE, it seemed that anyone with an army could become the



Rome is burning in this 18th-century French painting. Many people thought that Nero started the fire so that he could build a new palace.

☞ Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, 130 CE

emperor of Rome. This savage year, called the Year of the Four Emperors, ended with the triumph of Vespasian.

Vespasian, a soldier from the Italian middle class, was completely different from the emperors who preceded him. The historian Suetonius applauds his goodness:

My researches show that no innocent person was ever punished during Vespasian’s reign except behind his back or while he was away from Rome. . . . He never rejoiced in anyone’s death and was often known to weep when convicted criminals were executed.

☞ Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*, 130 CE

The new emperor was practical and thrifty. Because Nero’s years of wild spending had left the empire bankrupt, Vespasian was forced to raise taxes. At one point, his son complained that the tax on Rome’s public toilets was crude. The emperor held a coin under the young man’s nose. “Does this money smell bad to you?” he asked.

☞ Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*, 130 CE

Vespasian’s reforms restored the economy and kept the soldiers loyal. At last, the emperor no longer had to be tied to the leaders of the past—not to Julius Caesar, nor even to Augustus. The leadership of Rome had changed, and, with it, the future. Nero had built an enormous palace for himself in the center of Rome. On the same spot, Vespasian began building the Colosseum, a center for the people’s entertainment. When his son, the Emperor Titus, launched the Colosseum’s opening games in 80 CE, the people’s wishes were first and foremost.

Sadly for Rome, Titus ruled only from 79 to 81 CE. He was succeeded by his brutal brother, Domitian, who ruled until 96. Once again, a tyrant sat on the imperial throne. Although Domitian was a successful general, his reign was marked by book burnings, plots, and executions. Domitian died the way he had lived: in a palace conspiracy. Even his wife took part in the plot against him. The historian Tacitus tells how hard it was to be in the presence of such a monster: “It was no small part of our sufferings that we saw Domitian and were seen by him. Our sighs were noticed by him, and his cruel eyes saw whenever we turned pale. His red face made sure that he never blushed from shame.”

☞ Tacitus, *Life of Agricola*, 98 CE