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Roman dig backs ancient writers' portrait of megalomaniac Caligula

Ruins reveal ruler extended palace into Forum temple

John Hooper in Rome
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British and American archaeologists digging in the Roman Forum said yesterday they had uncovered evidence to suggest that the emperor Caligula really was a self-deifying megalomaniac, and not the misunderstood, if eccentric, ruler that modern scholars have striven to create.

For several decades historians have been lifting their eyebrows at the Latin authors' portrait of Caligula as a madman who came to believe he was a god.

But Darius Arya of the American Institute for Roman Culture said a 35-day dig by young archaeologists from Oxford and Stanford universities had reinstated a key element in the traditional account.

"We have the proof that the guy really was nuts," said Dr Arya as he sat in the shade of a clump of trees a few metres from the excavation.

Suspicious of the very unanimity of the ancient sources, modern scholars have suggested they could have been politically biased.

They have argued, for example, that Caligula's renowned plan to make his horse a consul was really a joke that his subjects failed to comprehend. And, for many years, they have taken a sceptical view of a claim, by Suetonius, that he incorporated one of Rome's most important temples into his own palace.

Writing about 70 years after Caligula's assassination, Suetonius recorded that the emperor "built out a part of the palace as far as the Forum, and making the temple of Castor and Pollux its vestibule, he often took his place between the divine brethren, and exhibited himself there to be worshipped."

"This was so outrageous - an act of such impiety, such hubris - that a lot of historians have had great difficulty in believing it," said archaeologist Andrew Wilson, the leader of the Oxford University team.

Earlier digs in the area showed that a street had run between the two buildings in both the 1st and 3rd centuries AD, before Caligula's reign.

This gave rise to a theory that the emperor had merely built a bridge between them, even though another ancient source provided an explanation for the apparent contradiction: that the original

street was re-established when Caligula's successor, Claudius, destroyed his blasphemous extension.

Standing in the broiling sun of a Rome August afternoon, Dr Wilson said yesterday that the latest excavations had uncovered no trace of a bridge, but they had found more and more evidence of structures within the site of Caligula's palace that ran at an identical angles to others abutting the site of the temple of Castor and Pollux.

The dig had also revealed sewerage lines running at the same angle. "The Caligulan foundations imply walls that seem to be projected across the line of the street as far as the temple," Dr Wilson said.

He pointed to a stretch of floor, also uncovered by the dig, which showed that Caligula's palace had at one time projected into the line of the street: the angles of the room put one corner within the carriageway.

"You don't have any room for a street any longer," he said.

This and other anomalies forced him and his colleagues to start rethinking their assumptions and conclude that the ancient sources seemed to be right: that an extension was indeed built which obliterated the street between the palace and the temple, but that Claudius had pulled it down and restored the street a few years later.

He said the hypothesis had begun to take shape only about a week ago.

"From the Forum, what you would have seen was the palace rearing up behind the temple, which would have looked just like his lobby," Dr Wilson said.

"There would have been no longer any distinction between the house of god and the house of the emperor."

Unhappy childhood

- Caligula - Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus - was Rome's third emperor, ruling AD37 to 41
- As a baby he was taken by his parents on military campaigns and shown to troops wearing miniature soldier's outfit, including hob-nailed sandal - caliga.
- His later excesses have been ascribed to a troubled upbringing: his mother and two brothers all died violently
- To become emperor, Caligula ordered the murder of his cousin. He was greeted by wave of popular approval which evaporated as he became ever more arrogant, erratic and cruel. He was said to have had incestuous relationships with his sisters and to have planned to make his horse a consul. He once ordered hundreds of ships tied together so that he could ride across the bay of Naples.
- He was assassinated at 28 by Praetorian Guards

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