



The Madness of Power: Analyzing Caligula's Reign and Psychology Through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

SOYLU, Poyraz

Gülizar Zeki Obdan High School,
poyrazsoylu2010@gmail.com

Publication Date: 2025/11/28

Abstract

There were some significant leaders in the history of the countries and regions. They have not been forgotten for centuries. Some of them did great jobs in their presence, for their nations and countries and even humanity. However, some others have been remembered by their bloody and autocratic administration; for example, they tortured their public. Caligula is one example of the second type of leadership. Although he did not achieve any military or political success, he became infamous for his notorious behaviors. These include, not least, the appointment of his horse as a consul, an incestuous relationship with his sister, and even his absurd order for the sun to rise in the middle of the night. This study will dig out Caligula's turbulent life. The reason of his desire of brutality and inhumane treatments trace back to traumas of his childhood. Moreover, this article will apply Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to Caligula's life sketch.

Keywords: *Caligula, Hierarchy of Needs, Leader, Maslow, Roman Empire, Tyranny.*

Introduction

Autocracy, when combined with psychological trauma and unmet emotional needs, can lead to devastating consequences for both rulers and their subjects. Caligula, one of Rome's most infamous emperors, serves as a compelling case study for the intersection between power and pathology. While historical records focus on his brutal decisions and eccentric behaviors, this paper adopts a psychological lens, employing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to interpret the emperor's descent into tyranny. This paper argues that Caligula's personal history — including loss, alienation, and emotional instability — prevented him from fulfilling his own psychological needs, which in turn manifested in destructive political choices that also denied those same needs to his subjects. Throughout history, leaders have played a crucial role in shaping the psychological and social realities of their societies. While some rulers guided their people toward prosperity and fulfillment, others plunged entire nations into fear and deprivation. Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, commonly known as Caligula, exemplifies the latter. By examining his reign through the lens of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, we can better understand how autocratic rule can suppress or distort the fundamental human needs of both individuals and societies.

Caligula's Life Experience

Caligula was the third emperor (AD 12-41) of the Roman Empire and the son of Germanicus (World History Encyclopedia). He came from the Julio-Claudian dynasty, to which the first five Roman emperors belonged. The name "Caligula" means "little soldier's sandal." Soldiers gave him this name because Caligula wanted to be a soldier from a young age and dressed like a soldier (Graham, 2025).

Although he himself rejected this nickname, he is still known as Caligula. While Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, was still on the throne, the question "Who will be the heir to the throne?" began to be asked. It was thought that the heir would be Germanicus, the father of Caligula. Augustus, however, chose Tiberius on the condition that he adopt Germanicus.

Germanicus was then sent to the east. While in the East, Tiberius is thought to have poisoned him on November 10, 19 (Graham, 2025). In 27, the young Caligula was sent to live with Tiberius' mother, Livia. Meanwhile, allegations have been made about Caligula that he had an incestuous relationship with his sister, but nothing clear can be said (Aysan, 2024). Caligula was always a favorite of Tiberius. There are many heretical gossips about Caligula, who stayed in Capri from 31 to 37 (Fenmere, 2025). Since Tiberius and Caligula were not very popular, it is normal for such rumors to occur. Caligula ascended the throne

with the death of Tiberius in 37. According to one idea, Tiberius was strangled with a pillow so that Caligula could ascend the throne earlier (Damon, 2012).

Betrayals, assassinations, poisonings, and strangulations were commonplace in Rome. Even before Caligula ascended the throne, he participated in the torture of slaves and watched bloody gladiatorial games, even his entertainment was bloody (Holland, 2025).

Caligula's accession initially brought relief and optimism among the Roman people. They were finally freed from Tiberius' oppressive rule. Caligula was the first emperor to be admired by the whole world, from the place where the sun rises to the place where it sets by public (Philo, 41 CE/2021).

This was the beginning of a new era. In his early days, he was generous, although he was of a political nature. He overpaid the Praetorian guard, destroyed Tiberius' treason documents and declared treason prosecutions a thing of the past, recalled exiles, and helped those who suffered from the Imperial tax system. He removed sex offenders from the empire. It is also known to be quite extravagant for things like gladiatorial fights. These actions initially brought him quite a reputation in the eyes of the public.

In addition, he revived free elections for the people. He reopened the Roman Imperial annals, which had been closed during the reign of Tiberius. For these reasons, Caligula was called "The Sun" by the people. While everything was going well, Caligula's psychological problems arose. (Mallan, 2021)

When the heresies which Tiberius had suppressed while he was present were exposed, the people regretted it. It was thought that Caligula, who suffered a serious illness in the year he ascended the throne, would die, but Caligula survived. Historian Howard Hayes Scullard says (1982), "He emerged from his illness a monster of lust and a demonic tyrant. While Caligula was very respectful to the Senate at first, he gradually began to make maverick decisions. His relationship with the Senate is one of the most significant points in Caligula's period. In particular, his dismissal of the consuls in 39 without talking to the senate caused a rift with the senate.

He ordered everyone to shave their heads for fear of baldness, declared his beloved horse consul for fear of being assassinated, another famous scandal is intent to raise his horse, Incitatus, to consular rank (Miles, 2007).

However, it is known that this situation is not real. Incitatus was the favorite horse of Caligula, and he dressed Incitatus in purple, the color which represents royalty.

"The infamous incident where he appointed his beloved horse, Incitatus, as a consul served as both a mockery of senatorial authority and a stark reminder of the emperor's unchecked power. Instead of laughter, this act bred resentment, as senators felt

they were being ridiculed rather than respected. "(Hawkinson, 2025, p.148).

He reportedly ordered the sun to rise at night, wandered the corridors in fear, and had his sleep interrupted by constant suspicions of assassination. Caligula is one of the most paranoid people, history has ever seen. Serious issues or illnesses can occur in the life of a leader. Paranoia is the greatest enemy of a commander.

Caligula, who declared himself a living god (The History Hour, 2018), declared her a goddess when his sister, with whom he was in a relationship, died. He reportedly opened a brothel in his palace and was in the habit of taking the wives of members of the Senate to his own bedroom during social events, even though their husbands could only look after them as they left. He then described his sexual acts with his spouses in the presence of their husbands in a way that everyone could hear. All these heresies gradually increased, and he sold the spouses of high-ranking senators to the highest bidder (Holland, 2025).

These absurd behaviors had begun to anger the senate and assassination plans had begun to be made. Caligula spent excessively, both for his own pleasure and for his wants, and over time he melted the treasure left by Tiberius. He went beyond seeing himself as a god, beheading statues of the gods and making his own busts.

His excesses weakened Rome in every way, and he used the birth of his daughter as an excuse to collect extra money from the people in order to put his own heresies into practice. His harsh and unnecessary rules brought more blood and death to the Empire, and his paranoia led to the death of even those closest to him.

Surviving sources mention several political successes achieved by Caligula. During his reign, Mauretania, which had joined the empire, was restructured into two provinces. Herod Antipas was appointed governor of Judea. Several disturbances between Jews and Greeks in Alexandria and other eastern provinces were suppressed.

During the reign of Caligula, the ports of Rhegium and Sicily were improved. Grain imports from Egypt were increased. Public works were completed, temples were built, and walls repaired. Caligula was also portrayed, albeit reluctantly, as a very persuasive, good orator and generally popular in the eyes of the Roman public.

Despite these actions, Caligula, who had no military successes, wanted to conquer Britain, but his army did not trust him. Soldiers were right because their commander hasn't got an experience in the war field and even one of the respectful Emperor, Gaius Julius Caesar, couldn't conquer Britain completely. Therefore, there weren't any belief for Caligula to earn a power in Britain, and they don't make a mistake at this point.

When the army refused to cross the English Channel, Caligula's wish could not be fulfilled. A soldier must trust his/her commander otherwise even he/she fights against a villager the result will be defeat. Caligula could not return empty-handed from this expedition, so he ordered the soldiers to collect seashells.

These seashells represented Caligula's victory over the god Neptune (Poseidon). When Roman Empire conquered Greece in 146 BC, they obsessed with Greek religion, culture, science and developed with this conquer.

"Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit (Greece, captured, captured a fierce conqueror.)" (Horace, 14 BC/2002). They adopted all of Greek mythology as their own religion and changed the names of the pantheon. For example, the chief god Zeus named as the larger planet in the solar system Jupiter.

This defeat was the last straw for the Senate, and a conspiracy was urgently planned. Caligula realized this and refused to enter the city. As he hadn't got any military success, his only purpose to conquer Britain was avoiding from death.

If he had returned from the British expedition successfully, he would have only been able to postpone his death a little because the Senate had wanted to get rid of Caligula for a long time and the unsuccessful British expedition had been a very justified reason for them.

His paranoia was clearly a necessity for being face to face with the Senate. In Roman Empire, the emperor's relation with Senate is critic for his future. Caligula was always stayed against Senate, actually he was against everyone during his period.

Caligula, who entered the city when his fear passed, left the arena where the Palatium games were held towards the end of January 41, under the pretext of eating and bathing. He was walking for his last time. As he walked, a group of army men intercepted him, and Caligula was stabbed multiple times to death. Caligula learned by experience that he is not a god. The other assassin stabbed Caligula's wife, Caesonia, and killed her young daughter, Julia Drusilla, by banging her head against the wall (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* XIX.1.15).

He was alone in his entire life, nevertheless not in death. Although the Senate wanted to take advantage of this assassination and rebuild the republic, this did not happen, Claudius became the new emperor. Claudius or Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus did what Gaius Julius Caesar and Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus could not do and established Roman rule in Britain (Scramuzza, 1940). Caligula is a mentally unstable leader according to some, addicted to the excess of all kinds of pleasures according to others, and sociopathic according to others.

Above all, his cruelty, arrogance, paranoia, military incompetence, indulgence, and perversion brought about the end of Caligula.

Caligula died consumed by hatred — not only for others but also for himself. The very people who once hailed him as "our sun" ultimately dismissed him as "our regret."

CALIGULA:

"Utinam populus Romanus unam cervicem haberet: "I wish the people of Rome had only one neck so I could separate it from the body in one stroke" (Holland, 2025).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a Framework to Understand Caligula's Rule

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a psychological theory that classifies human motivation into five levels — physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization — offers a compelling framework to evaluate the societal and individual impact of imperial leadership. As Maslow himself noted, "These basic needs are physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. They may be considered as needs arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency" (Maslow, 1943, p. 372).

When applied to the reign of Caligula, this framework reveals the systematic collapse of both public welfare and personal stability under autocratic excess. Caligula's life and policies, when viewed through Maslow's lens, demonstrate how unchecked power can distort not only the fulfillment of societal needs but also the ruler's own psychological development.

Caligula presents a psychological case, and if we aim to understand him comprehensively, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides the most suitable framework. This analysis will examine Caligula's life through the five levels of the pyramid. Each part will describe characteristics, life standards, goals and failures of the most brutal leader in history.

The Collapse of the Pyramid: Maslow's Framework Applied to Caligula

Physiological Needs

The most basic layer of Maslow's pyramid concerns survival: food, water, rest, and shelter. In the early years of Caligula's rule, he attempted to address these needs by organizing gladiatorial games and other ways to have fun. At first glance, it might appear that an emperor would never struggle with basic physiological needs such as access to water, shelter, or clothing.

Yet in Caligula's case, such assumptions prove misleading. His pervasive paranoia undermined even these fundamental aspects of existence: he could not drink water without suspicion, could not rest without fear, and could not walk without guards. In the long term, even the presence of guards failed to provide reassurance, as he feared betrayal from those closest to him. Ultimately, he lacked trust not only in others but also in himself.

Safety Needs

Security of body, health, property, and legal justice are at the core of this second level. Caligula's reign is infamous for its pervasive atmosphere of paranoia and fear. Arbitrary executions, political purges, and the dissolution of legal procedures destroyed any sense of personal or societal safety. His public spectacles of cruelty and mockery of legal institutions — including appointing his horse as consul — reveal a conscious disregard for this essential need.

The citizens of Rome, regardless of status, lived under the threat of random violence and persecution. We can say that Caligula is right to be a paranoiac because if we look at the conclusion he died because of a suicide. But the real question is "Why he died because of a suicide not a heart attack or brain hemorrhage?"

Love and Belonging Needs

Social connection — love, friendship, familial ties — becomes almost impossible in an environment of fear. Caligula not only destroyed trust within the Senate but also invaded the private lives of his political rivals, even publicly humiliating them and their spouses. Allegations of incest and his theatrical treatment of relationships suggest that Caligula's personal ability to form genuine emotional bonds was severely compromised.

Instead of fostering communal spirit, he fostered isolation, surveillance, and betrayal. Caligula's idea of entertainment was completely different. We can also include the incident with the senators' wives in this topic. In this huge empire, even his relatives hated him. He can't afford his belonging needs. Think that you are sleeping with someone but neither you nor your partner loves this situation because this is only a necessity not an entertainment. Everything you do is a game and has no emotional reality. That means Caligula fails at this level again.

Esteem Needs

Statue means everything for an ordinary or popular person, because of this meaning Maslow puts "Esteem Needs" before the last level of his pyramid and made an excellent choice. The need for respect, recognition, and self-esteem plays a central role in Caligula's descent. Rather than earning admiration through just rule or military achievement, Caligula demanded divine worship. He declared himself a living god and sought to be feared rather than respected. His narcissism and obsession with status reflect an unfulfilled and disordered pursuit of esteem.

For the Roman population, meanwhile, the destruction of merit-based advancement and public dignity created a void in self-worth and societal stability. At first, everyone seemed to respect him very much, but then everything changed. The public thought that he was cursed and he would bring the

destruction of Rome. In fact, he nearly did so yet ultimately fail even in that.

Self-Actualization

The highest level of Maslow's hierarchy involves achieving one's full potential and creative expression. Under Caligula's regime, cultural life suffered. Fear-based censorship and the suppression of intellectual freedom left little space for philosophical or artistic growth. Caligula's own sense of self-actualization was distorted by delusion: he sought transcendence through domination, humiliation, and divine pretense. What Maslow defines as personal growth became, in Caligula's case, self-destruction. Caligula could not reach the higher levels of the pyramid because he failed to satisfy even its most basic levels. The concept of self-actualization is very different for an Emperor such as Caligula. You might say that getting a promotion from work is enough for me. If you are Caligula you have to conquer, defeat, beat, unite with others, be acknowledged by the public, and be loved by your people.

Honestly, he remained only a tyrant and could not go beyond that. Perhaps his goal of self-realization was simply to cross the English Channel. But even in this goal he lost to a God who didn't exist. In fact, he was just someone trying to realize his own desires for self-actualization, because of this he declared himself as a god. According to the Roman tradition when the emperor dies the public remembers him as a god. However, this tradition isn't enough for Caligula, he wants to be remembered as a god while he is leaving, because his only purpose is to ensure obedience.

Conclusion

Caligula's psychological and behavioral condition appears deeply pathological. We can describe this tyrant as a psychopath or mentally ill. He failed in every way, he could not afford an emperor's responsibilities to the public, soldiers and senators. He failed as a husband, a leader, a commander, and even as a man by the standards of his own time. When examining the Pyramid of Maslow and apply to this whole failure man, we expect it to be at the top of the pyramid because the subject is an emperor not an ordinary man. However, we are facing someone who has reached the deep of the pyramid. This is why Caligula's life appears tragic. While many might aspire to lead the Roman Empire, few would wish to do so if it meant becoming "a Caligula." If one were to assume the position of Caligula, the outcome would be clear: despite commanding an army, he remained profoundly isolated. His apparent power was undermined by alienation and mistrust, to the extent that even his own soldiers were reluctant to obey his orders. No one loves you, even the people you sleep with hate you, even your sister. His pervasive anxiety prevented him from achieving even the most basic need for restorative sleep. No matter how

comfortable his bed might have been, paranoia pierced his rest like a bed of needles, leaving him restless and tormented. Neither respect, nor love, nor security, nor success, nor any other good things in life you will have be. All you have is your position of no consequence, women who are disgusted by you, and alcohol that wants to spill on the floor and go to waste when it goes into your mouth. Now say it: would you want to be Caligula? Even an unemployed person may have some positions in their life; this can be a wife, a house, a child, a piece of fence, a T-shirt or anything else. Caligula doesn't even have a piece of fence to protect him. Understanding Caligula could only be achieved by adapting Maslow's pyramid. By examining Caligula through each level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it becomes evident that he exemplifies a profoundly disturbed psychological profile. His pervasive paranoia, inability to form meaningful relationships, and chronic failure to satisfy even basic human needs underscore the severity of his dysfunction. This analysis suggests that Caligula's case warrants careful and systematic study from both historical and psychological perspectives, providing valuable insights into the complex interaction between personal pathology and autocratic leadership.

References

Aysan. (2024). *Caligula: The reign of madness (37–41 AD)*

Damon, C. (Trans.). (2012). *Annals* by Tacitus. Penguin Classics.

Fenmere, O. W. (2025). *Caligula biography: The history and legacy from beginning to the end*

Graham, M. (2025). *The Mad Emperor: Caligula*

Hawkinson, E. (2025). *Caligula: Power & paradox – The reign of Rome's third emperor (Historical Biographies)*.

Holland, T. (Trans.). (2025). *The Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius. Penguin Classics.

Horace. (14 BC/2002). *The Epistles of Horace: Bilingual edition* (D. Ferry, Trans.). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Josephus. (93-94 CE/2021). *Antiquities of the Jews: Book XIX, 1.15* (R. Marcus, Trans.). Alpha Edition.

Mallan, C. T. (Ed. & Trans.). (2021). *Cassius Dio: Roman history: Books 57 and 58 (The reign of Tiberius)*. Oxford University Press.

Maslow, A. H. (1943). *A theory of human motivation. Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>

Miles, G. (2007). *Caligula and the Roman Senate*.

Philo of Alexandria. (41CE/2021). *On the Embassy to Gaius* (C. D. Yonge, Trans.). Good Press.

Scramuzza, V. (1940). *The Roman conquest of Britain*. University of California Press.

Scullard, H. H. (1982). *From the Gracchi to Nero: A history of Rome from 133 B.C. to A.D. 68* (5th ed.). London: Routledge.

The History Hour. (2018). *CALIGULA: The Third Emperor. The Entire Life Story* (Great Biographies No. 16) [Paperback]. Independently Published.

World History Encyclopedia. Retrieved August 21, 2025 from: <https://www.worldhistory.org/Caligula/>