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Narcissism in the Iconography of Roman Emperors: Caligula and Nero as a Case Study

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Abstract: Body gestures serve as a silent language that reveals an individual's psychological traits. Roman art effectively utilized these gestures to convey the personality of the emperor. This study analyzes the manifestations of narcissism in the statues of Nero and Caligula, comparing them with the composed body gestures of Marcus Aurelius, an emperor known for his philosophical approach to governance.

By examining artistic depictions, this research illustrates how art shaped an exalted self-image that reflected absolute power and narcissistic tendencies within the political and psychological context of these emperors. The analysis integrates archaeological studies with a psychological approach, employing criteria from the DSM-5 for narcissistic personality disorder.

In contrast, the representation of Marcus Aurelius emphasizes his humility and philosophical influence. This study provides a multidisciplinary perspective on the artistic depictions of emperors, revealing the interplay between their psychological states and political aspirations.

Keywords: Body language, Narcissism, Caligula, Nero, Marcus Aurelius, Psychological Portraiture.

ملامح "النرجسية" في تصوير الأباطرة الرومان: كاليجولا ونيرون نموذجًا

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الملخص: تُعد إشارات الجسد لغة غير منطوقة تعكس السمات النفسية العميقة للفرد، وقد استخدمها الفن الروماني لتجسيد شخصية الإمبراطور. في هذا البحث، نُحلل مظاهر النرجسية من خلال إشارات الجسد في تماثيل نيرون وكاليجولا، ثم نقارنها بإشارات الجسد لدى ماركوس أوريليوس، أحد الأباطرة الذين ارتبطوا بالفلسفة والرؤية المتزنة للحكم.

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل السمات النرجسية لدى الإمبراطورين الرومانيين كاليجولا ونيرون، من خلال تتبع تصويرهم الفني في أعمال فنية مختلفة. توضح الدراسة أهمية الفن في تشكيل صورة ذاتية متعالية سواءُ تجسّد السلطة المطلقة، أو تعكس ميولًا نرجسية واضحة لشخصية الامبراطور، وذلك في ضوء السياق السياسي والنفسي للإمبراطور.

يستند التحليل إلى الجمع بين الدراسات الأثرية والمقاربة النفسية، بالاعتماد على معايير اضطراب الشخصية النرجسية كما وردت في الدليل التشخيصي والإحصائي للأمراض النفسية (DSM-5) .

ومن ناحية أخرى أُستخدمت الملامح الفنية لتصوير الإمبراطور أوريليوس الذي عُرف عنه الاتزان والتواضع وعكست فلسفته أثرها الواضح في حكمه. ومن خلال هذا التباين، تُبرز الدراسة الأبعاد النفسية–الفنية التي تكشف كيف ارتبط الفن الإمبراطوري بإنتاج خطاب سلطوي يُضخم من صورة الحاكم ويجمّد الواقع لصالح سردية مثالية.

ويمكن بذلك أن تقدم هذه الدراسة قراءة متعددة التخصصات في التصوير الفني الإمبراطوري دون أن يلجأ الفنان للمبالغة أو الزخرفة الفنية بوصفه أداة للتعبير عن الاضطراب النفسي وكذا السياسي، وليس فقط عن الهيبة أو الشرعية.

الكلمات الدالة: لغة الجسد، النرجسية، التحليل النفسي للبورتريهات، كاليجولا، نيرون، ماركوس أوريلليوس

Introduction:

The myth of Narcissus, as told in Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book III, provides a symbolic basis for understanding narcissism as a state of excessive self-centeredness, a need for admiration, and an inability to tolerate criticism[1]. Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection in water, ultimately annihilating himself. Modern psychologists have reinvested this myth in constructing narcissism theory. Havelock Ellis[2] was the first to use the term to describe the sexual orientation toward oneself in 1898, before Sigmund Freud[3] developed it in his famous study "On Narcissism" (1957), linking it to the development of sexual and self-identity. The concept continued to develop with Otto Kernberg[4] and Heinz Kohut[5] during the 1970s, with narcissism becoming a distinct psychiatric diagnosis in medical classifications, especially after its official adoption in the third edition of the DSM[6] in 1980.

This mythological and psychological accumulation provides a solid foundation for analyzing historical figures who embodied narcissism as excessive domineering and physical behavior, as evident in the political and artistic portrayals of both the emperors Caligula and Nero. The myth tells of Narcissus, a youth of extraordinary beauty, born to the river god Cephisus and the nymph Liriope. Upon his birth, his mother consulted the soothsayer Tiresias about whether her son would live long, and he replied, "Yes, if he doesn't know himself." Narcissus grew up to be stunningly beautiful, but he was arrogant, loved no one back, and rejected all his lovers. Among these was the nymph Echo, cursed to repeat only the words of others. She fell in love with him, but he spurned her witheringly, and she withered away until only her voice remained. To punish Narcissus for his arrogance and refusal to accept the love of others, one of the spurned lovers called upon the goddess Aphrodite to make him experience the same pain he caused others. Aphrodite, protector of spurned lovers, complied.

One day, while wandering in the woods, Narcissus bent down by a clear stream and saw his own reflection. He clung to it, mistaking it for another beautiful young man/woman. Not realizing that it was just his own image, he continued to stare at it, captivated, trying to reach it, but whenever he touched the water, the image faded. His condition deteriorated, he stopped eating or drinking, and he remained captivated by his own beauty until he died on the banks of the stream. Upon his death, his body is said to have disappeared, and in its place grew a beautiful flower with a yellow core and white petals: the Narcissus flower[7].

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[1] Otto F.Kernberg, Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975), 109.

[2] Ellis, Havelock. “Auto-erotism: A Psychological Study.” *Alienist and Neurologist*, 1898.

[3] Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, trans. Cecil M. Baines, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 73–102.

[4] Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions*.

[5] Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

[6] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: APA, 1980).

[7] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book 3, lines 339–510.

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ʿAbd al-muʿṭī šʿrāwy, al-ʾasāṭīr al-iġrīqīẗ, asāṭīr al-bšr, ğ1, al-hīʾiẗ al-mṣrīẗ al-ʿāmẗ llktāb, al-qāhrẗ, 1982, 145-157.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the myth of Narcissus represents the symbolic origin of the formation of the "narcissistic ego" When Narcissus falls in love with his own image, what he loves is not the other but rather an imagined, idealized self, which he cannot fully possess.[1] At the same time, he is unable to recognize that the "other" is not an extension of himself; he sees in the world only a reflection of himself. This is known as auto-erotic fixation, which in turn leads to psychological death, because Narcissus rejects the other and, consequently, rejects growth and openness[2]. Thus, Narcissus is a symbol of narcissism: infatuation with the image, a rejection of reality, and an inner collapse that is only realized when it is too late. Here we will analyze the cases of both Caligula and Nero—in their physical and political portrayals—and how they appear as models of an emperor who loves his own image, as reported in literary sources:

surrounding themselves with statues and mirrors[3], trying to control the emotions of their face (Caligula's case, especially fig. 4), and manifestations of deification.

They are depicted in Roman art as divine-ideal (such as the depiction of Nero imitating the god Apollo in his famous statue, the Colossus of Nero [4] (Fig. 2)[5].

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[1] In his essay "On Narcissism" (1957), Sigmund Freud presents one of his most significant concepts, distinguishing between two types of narcissism: primary narcissism and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism is a normal stage in child development where love is centered on the self. In contrast, secondary narcissism occurs when a person withdraws their feelings from the external world and redirects them inward, often as a result of frustration or emotional injury. Freud, *On Narcissism* , 73–102.

[2] Jacques Lacan also sees in "The Mirror Stage" (Le stade du miroir) that when a child sees his image in a mirror for the first time, he begins to construct an "ideal ego," external to the self, but also illusory. Narcissus, from this perspective, is stuck in this primitive stage, unable to transcend his fascination with the image and to build a real relationship with reality or others.Jacques Lacan, "Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du je," in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 93–100.

[3] Suetonius described Caligula as "standing before a mirror for hours, practicing the different expressions of his face…" (Suetonius, Caligula, 52)

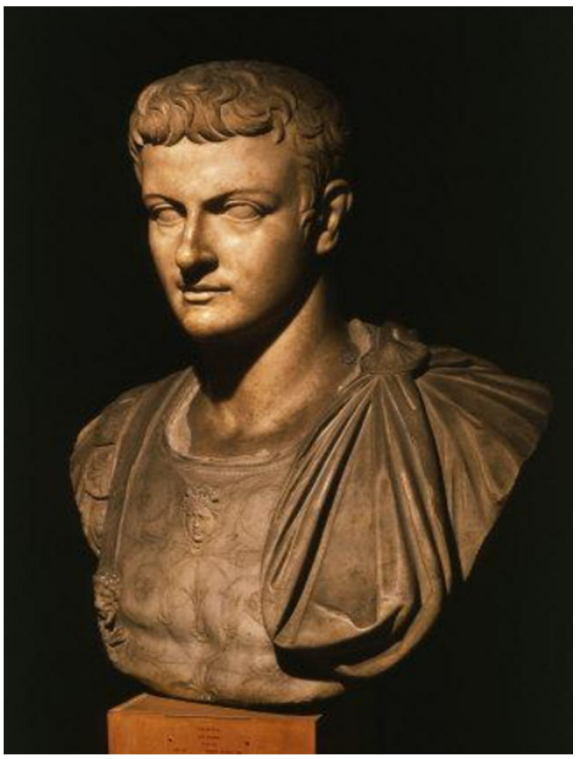
[4] The erection of the Colossus, approximately 120 meters tall, was inspired by Nero's Apollo image, with some sources showing him wearing the solar crown (similar to the god Sol), symbolically emulating the center of the universe. Nero is depicted here not as an emperor commanding an army, but as the cosmic axis, in which everything is reflected, but in whom no one is reflected. He represents a unique manifestation of narcissism in both its artistic and symbolic form. Nero chose to place this colossal statue in the entrance hall of his golden palace (Domus Aurea), so that it would serve as the first proclamation of the emperor as a transcendent being. This type of monumental representation is inseparable from a strategy of self-glorification and deification, whereby Nero re-presents himself as a semi-divine being, imposing his compelling presence in the public sphere. In this context, the statue was not merely a propaganda tool but a material, narcissistic structure that sought to impose an inflated image of the self on the surrounding world, centered in an architectural space designed to embody the "Neroian universe" in all its elements. The Roman historian Suetonius described this structure in his biography of Nero, noting the massiveness of the statue and the lavish surroundings: "...a colossal statue of Nero, 120 feet tall, stood in the hall of the house. The latter was so vast that it contained three porticoes a mile long and a pool resembling a sea, surrounded by buildings the size of cities. On the other side were villas surrounded by fields, vineyards, pastures, and forests teeming with all kinds of domestic and wild animals." (Suetonius, Nero, 31.1)

[5] Colossus of Nero Statue Today in Rome - Facts & History ; M. Bergmann, "*Portraits of an Emperor – Nero, the Sun, and Roman Otium*," in *A Companion to the Neronian Age*, ed. Emma Buckley and Martin T. Dinter (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 332-62.

They marginalize the other and see in the people and the world a mirror that reflects only their greatness.

(Fig. 1)

(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)[1]

(Fig. 4)

[1] Roman Emperor Caligula believed he was a god. He was assassinated for it | National Geographic

Although Freud did not focus directly on body signals in the modern sense (body language), his analysis emphasized the importance of unconscious bodily expressions as indicators of psychological conflicts, including narcissistic conflicts. For example, muscle tension, facial expressions, or repetitive movements may be an indication of an unconscious attempt to conceal feelings of anxiety or vulnerability[1].

According to Freud, the narcissist demonstrates a desire to appear ideal and powerful[2], and this is reflected in bodily signals through: Muscle tension: a result of anxiety about revealing inner weakness; Avoidance of eye contact: to reinforce dominance and control of the external image; Exaggerated or reserved movements: to express a desire for control or psychological defense[3].

The following characteristics illustrate the personality traits of a person with narcissistic personality disorder. If five of these are present, the person suffers from narcissistic personality disorder[4]:

- Has an exaggerated sense of self-importance.
- Preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
- Requires excessive admiration.
- Feels entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of preferential treatment).
- Exploits others.

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[1] Freud, *On Narcissism*, 114.

[2] Several analytical psychologists, such as Kernberg, and other Freudians further developed this concept by linking narcissism to specific bodily signals, building on Freud's foundations regarding unconscious conflicts reflected in body language. Otto Kernberg focused on pathological narcissism within psychoanalysis and explained how narcissists use carefully controlled bodily signals to impose an image of superiority and dominance. For example, contorted body postures and stern facial expressions reflect a desire to control and conceal vulnerability (Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions*, 115). Erich Fromm discussed narcissism from a social and humanistic perspective and considered that body language and physical behavior express a state of inner detachment and pathological vanity. Narcissists display body postures that convey superiority or separation from others (Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 97). Aaron Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, talked about how narcissists may display grandiose body behaviors as part of inflated ideas about themselves, such as staring or adopting body postures that suggest dominance, which are signals that support their narcissism (Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 142). In his 2015 study, Eric James investigated the relationship between body language and narcissism in workplace settings and found that narcissists use body signals such as excessively extended arms and legs to convey superiority, in addition to direct, fixed gazes to assert control (James 2015, 78).

[3] Freud, *On Narcissism*, 70.

[4] All of these traits were confirmed by Gardner in his analysis of Nero's personality and the illnesses he suffered from. See: A. Gardner, "Nero Tyrannus: The Physiological and Psychosomatic Causes of His Tyrannical Legacy" (BA thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2015), Table 23, 32. Narcissistic trait tests, such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), are also used in psychology as projective indicators that can be applied to artistic images to analyze bodily cues such as eye language, features, and posture, which indicate self-aggrandizement or arrogance (Robert Raskin and Heath Terry, "A Principal-Components Analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and Further Evidence of Its Construct Validity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54, no. 5 (1988): 890).

- Lacks empathy and is unwilling to acknowledge the feelings and needs of others.
- Excessively envies others or believes they are envious.
- Exhibits arrogant and condescending behaviors or attitudes.
- The Narcissistic Mask of the Narcissistic Self

Roman artists during the Imperial period relied on sculptural techniques of idealized realism and hence combined the idealized character of the ruler with distinctive features that assert political and psychological dominance. This technique was particularly used in statues of narcissistic emperors such as Caligula and Nero.

In Roman art, statues, sculptures, and portraits were not merely decorative; they were essential tools in constructing collective identity and cementing political loyalty to the ruler. Statues of emperors were used to create a lasting presence of power. Their features, postures, and size conveyed a visual narrative of dominance, cemented in the collective memory either through veneration or by invoking collective awe and submission[1].

According to Jungian psychoanalysis, the "persona" is the face displayed to the world, while the "self" represents the true inner essence[2]. In the context of imperial statues, depictions of emperors with elaborate, idealized features can be read as a carefully crafted mask to conceal internal crises and political weakness. The physical gestures are an expression of the "mask" constructed by the narcissist to protect his internally fragile self. For example, statues of Nero, whose smooth, expressionless face reveals his inner tension, express the "mask of power" that conceals a "troubled self" suffering from the tensions of rule[3].

[1] Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988, 3–6; Tonio Hölscher, *The Language of Images in Roman Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 24.-30.

[2] Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 35–38.

[3] Erik Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism: A Psychological and Artistic Analysis of Postural Indicators* (Oslo: Nordic Institute for Behavioral Studies, 2013), 59. Nero's biography, according to classical sources, shows clear examples of what can be described as "imperial narcissism," a condition that goes beyond self-love to the exploitation of symbols of imperial power to construct an inflated self-image. Following his political marriage to power and the assassination of his mother, Agrippina the Younger, who was believed to have poisoned Emperor Claudius to secure the throne for her sixteen-year-old son, Nero began to dismantle his predecessor's legacy, publicly mocking him and calling him a "senile old man" (Suetonius, Nero, 33).

He later eliminated those around him from his family, including his adoptive brother and, finally, his mother, whom he first attempted to eliminate through a disguised drowning scheme, then ordered her stabbing to death when the scheme failed (Tacitus, Annals, XIV.5–8). This tendency to eliminate every threat, symbolic or actual, can be interpreted as a manifestation of defensive narcissism, in which the ruler seeks absolute dominance.

Nero did not stop there, for he devoted his thought and power to nurturing his delusion of grandeur. He established a festival in his own name – Neronia – to crown a winner in the arts and athletics. Even when he failed in a chariot race, the victory was symbolically awarded, claiming that "He would have won if he had not fallen" (Dio Cassius , Roman History, LXII.20). This self-deification culminated in the construction of a hundred-foot-tall statue of Nero depicting him as a sun god, far beyond the concept of princeps, or "first citizen" in the Roman republican tradition. This was accompanied by extreme extravagance aimed at buying the people's favor, which led to the burdening of taxes on the provincial population to finance his parties and personal projects, leading to an army mutiny and Nero's eventual suicide, leaving the state in chaos (Suetonius, Nero, 49–57; Tacitus, Annals, XV.72).

In Nero's statues, we are faced with a self-portrait created through Nero's eyes, about Nero, not about the people[1].While in Augustus's portraits, the focus was on mediation between the government and the people. Nero's statues reject this mediation in favor of self-glorification, reflecting the formation of an authoritarian narcissism aimed at supplanting the state behind the image of the emperor.

From this perspective, it is necessary to consider that the narcissistic depictions and sculptures of emperors (Nero and Caligula, for example) were not only an expression of their psyches but were also part of authoritarian governance strategies that relied on art as a tool for cognitive and political domination.

In this study, we will then follow an anthropological analysis[2] of the artistic and descriptive representations of the narcissistic behavior of the Roman emperors Nero (37-68 AD) and Caligula (12-41 AD), comparing them to Emperor Marcus Aurelius through body language. Relying on historical and archaeological sources and linking them to measures and indicators of narcissism in psychology, this study attempts to analyze artistic depictions of these emperors for narcissistic traits through:

- Body postures and gestures
- Facial expressions
- Physical interactions with others
- Physical symbols in art and architecture
- Symbols in clothing

The research will rely on a methodology for analyzing body language in ancient sources:

- An analysis of the historical narrative provided by Suetonius in his book (The Lives of the Twelve Caesars)
- An anthropological reading of the works of Tacitus
- An analysis of artistic depictions of emperors according to Ekman's (2003)[3] model of universal facial expressions. It will also rely on applying narcissistic diagnostic

[1] Paul Zanker, *The Art of Persuasion: Political Propaganda from Aeneas to Brutus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 132.

[2] Anthropology is the science that studies humans from all aspects: biological, cultural, social, and historical. The word is derived from the Greek: (ἄνθρωπος) anthropos = human; (λόγος) logia = science/study. In this study, we will rely on political anthropology: analyzing body language as a tool of governance; psychological anthropology: diagnosing historical figures; and archaeological anthropology: reading statues and coins as primary sources.

[3] Ekman's model provides a standard tool for diagnosing narcissistic traits through art. Ekman identified seven basic, innate facial expressions common across all cultures: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise, and contempt. Here, we will apply it within a comparative framework between emperors (Caligula/Nero vs. Marcus) and linking psychology and archaeology through facial muscle analysis. See: www.paulekman.com/facs; Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), 45-89. Taking into account that Roman art may exaggerate expressions for political and propaganda purposes (see Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 45; Hölscher, *Language of Images*, 25; Jaś Elsner, *Art and Propaganda in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 78). Therefore, the model was combined with literary and archaeological sources and was not relied upon. On any of them separately.

criteria based on the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5 model[1], attempting to diagnose this disorder through the following indicators:

- Postures of physical superiority
- Arrogant facial expressions
- Violation of personal space
- Exaggerated gestures

Special Analysis Tools

The study will adopt the assumption of the "Historical Body Language Diagnostic Scale for Narcissism"[2] (HIST-BL) to adapt it to the criteria of the American Psychiatric Association model[3], using basic indicators of narcissism and indicators in Roman history as follows:

A. Basic Indicators:

1-Physical Superiority:

- Head tilt >10 degrees in statues
- Violation of personal space in historical narratives
- Repeated postures of the gods (Apollo/Jupiter)

2-Need for Admiration:

- Repeated alteration of physical appearance (e.g., Nero's wobbly beard)
- Excessive bodily ornamentation (exceedingly high gold weights)

3-Lack of Empathy:

- Facial expressions depicted during the torture of others

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[1] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 669-672.

[2] The Historical Narcissism Diagnostic Scale (HNDS) is a term proposed in this paper, derived from the descriptive criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder as outlined in the second edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II). This scale was developed for analytical purposes when examining historical figures such as Nero, Hitler, and Alexander the Great. It is similar to the approach taken by Jerrold M. Post in his psychological study of historical leaders. See: Jerrold M. Post, *Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behavior* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[3] The author chose to use this hypothetical index instead of the DSM-5 because it avoids the limitations of direct clinical examination, which is not possible with historical figures. However, the index was ultimately replaced based on information from the sources, considering that historians' writings may contain biases that can be exaggerated. Narcissism is measured using a total score ranging from 0 to 100, which indicates the degree of narcissism: 0-30 signifies normal levels; 31-60 indicates mild narcissism; and 61-100 represents extreme narcissism. Please continue reading the table at the end of the study.

- Lack of statues showing balanced physical interaction with the subjects or people

B. Historical Indicators (Roman Narratives)

4-Violation of bodily rituals:

- Violation of sacred distance (1.5 m according to temple laws)
- Changes in traditional greeting postures (e.g., Caligula demands the kissing of feet)
- The body as a political tool (Body Dominance Index): Measured by:
- Number Statues in unconventional poses
- Repeated descriptions of bodily movements in political narratives
- Proportion of space occupied by the emperor's body in art

Art as a psycho-political projection in the age of Nero: From ruler to God

Nero's reign began in 54 AD amid complex political conflicts between the ruling families and the Roman elite. His reign (54–68 AD) witnessed intense political and social turmoil, punctuated by internal conspiracies such as the Piso Conspiracy in 65 AD, regional revolts in Britain and Germany, and general unease over popular failures and economic and political crises. This period also witnessed tragic events such as the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, which increased internal tensions and weakened Nero's influence within the Senate and the general public[1]. His early support for the Roman Empire gradually transformed into an authoritarian one[2]. These crises were clearly reflected in the evolution of his artistic depiction. His face in statues shifted from a naturalistic expression to a polished, idealized profile, reflecting a desire to conceal tension and fear behind a mask of power and control[3]. In response to his mounting

[1] Dio. 61.4.1-5; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.59–74
[2] Bergmann, "Portraits of an Emperor,"*112*
[3] Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100–450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45; Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 51.
The symbolism of body language in statues extends beyond mere physical features to include the depiction of deities such as Apollo and Aphrodite. This was an attempt to sanctify Nero's persona and bestow divine legitimacy upon his tumultuous rule. This trend reflects the use of political art that employed religious motifs to enhance authority (Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 52). According to Roman art writer Diana Kleiner, "Nero exploited religious artistic language to create a connection between himself and the gods, using visual strategies to compensate for his lost political legitimacy" (Diana E. E. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 122). Her assertion is strongly supported by ancient historians, who also validate the artistic analysis of Nero's monuments. For instance, Suetonius describes Nero as portraying himself as a god, utilizing art and architecture as means of political control. He "ordered the sculptures of statues depicting himself as Apollo, in an attempt to enhance his cult" (Suetonius, Nero, 31). Tacitus notes that political tensions were mirrored in artistic expressions and celebrations, as Nero sought to assert his dominance through artistic performances and statues that enveloped him in a divine aura. (Tacitus, *Annals*, XV.39)

crises, depictions of Nero began to take on more exaggerated and narcissistic characteristics[1].

Many impulsive and erratic behaviors that appeared during Nero's reign indicate some degree of bipolar disorder and psychopathy, especially after his mother's murder[2]. Literary sources mention many of Nero's immoral acts, such as his murder of his brother Britannicus simply because he felt his authority would be threatened by his mother's acquiescence. He was filled with jealousy and comparison, so he poisoned him without any sense of fear, punishment, or sympathy.[3] Nero then killed his mother to escape her control and strict supervision over him, as well as her criticism of his actions and words[4]. In any case, his actions were closer to narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) than any other psychological explanation, according to psychologists' criteria.

Narcissism as a political project:

Imperial literary and sculptural sources demonstrate that narcissism in the Roman era was not merely an individual psychological behavior but rather an integrated artistic-political project in which portraits were used as a tool to intentionally and rhetorically reproduce the imperial self-image. This image is deepened by the idea that the Roman statue itself was not a recording device but a rhetorical means of persuasion and glorification[5]; as Trimble says, it "presented an argument and attempted to persuade[6]." That is, the statue of the emperor did not display his real body but rather a political-

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[1] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 45.

Nero's narcissistic behavior can be partially attributed to his upbringing by a controlling and narcissistic mother. Such an environment often leads to the development of narcissistic traits in children, as they seek to assert their independence and superiority. This may help explain Nero's behavior, which included deifying himself and distancing himself from his mother when he perceived her as a threat to his authority. Recent psychological studies support the idea that narcissism in children may stem from being raised by narcissistic parents, particularly mothers. Research shows that children raised in a household with a narcissistic mother are more likely to develop narcissistic traits themselves, especially if they are seen as extensions of their mother's narcissism (Eddie Brummelman et al., "Origins of Narcissism in Children," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 12 (2015): 3661). Nero's actions, particularly his efforts to elevate himself and undermine his mother, may reflect a defensive response to maternal dominance, as noted by Anthony A. Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 140 and Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 97. For further information, see:

Barrett, *Agrippina*, 140ff.; Brummelman et al., "Origins of Narcissism," 3659–62; Richard S. Horton and Laura J. W. Tritsch, "Parenting Narcissists: What Kind of Parenting Leads to Narcissism?" in *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, ed. Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell (New York: Free Press, 2014), 127-150.

[2] K. Ranga Rama Krishnan, "Psychiatric and Medical Comorbidities of Bipolar Disorder," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 67, no. 1 (2005): 1-8.

[3] Tac. Ann. 13.15.1; Suet. Nero. 33.3; Dio. 61.7.5-6

[4] Suet. Nero. 34.1.

[5] Jennifer Trimble, "Corpore Enormi: The Rhetoric of Physical Appearance in Suetonius and Imperial Portrait Statuary," in *Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture*, ed. Jaś Elsner and Michel Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 115-154.

[6] Trimble, "Corpore Enormi", 129

narcissistic body designed to dazzle and deceive[1]. However, in our study here, we demonstrate that the statues and portraits somehow reflected the emperor's narcissism by combining literary and archaeological sources with psychoanalysis.

At the beginning of his reign at the age of 17, Nero appeared merely as a soft facade supported by Seneca's de facto rule. However, his image gradually began to change, as he reshaped his artistic image to reflect the "living god," as evident in his later busts.

Tacitus says in the *Annals* that Nero[2]:

"Sought that his image precede his decisions, and that his face precede him where his words could not reach."

This aligns with Reich's analysis, which asserts that the authoritarian narcissist uses the body as a means of persuasion before action[3]. The more challenges surrounding Nero (rebellion in Britain, economic collapse, opposition from the Senate), the more exaggerated his artistic image and statues became, as if his marble body compensated for the erosion of real power. This is what Salvesen refers to when she says that authoritarian narcissists "resort to artistic exaggeration as a tool to compensate for political or psychological exposure[4]." Nero's statue represents not only his body but also his vision of himself as a substitute for the people and the state. It is a reflection of the political narcissism that drove Rome to flames. He sings and smiles while the empire

[1] In her study, Kleiner, for example, argues that Nero's portraits reflect the development of his imperial personality throughout his reign. Initially, he was depicted with softer features and relatively modest expressions, but later depictions, particularly in his posthumous statues, displayed exaggerated features consistent with his theatrical and haughty demeanor. This reflects Nero's increasing narcissism and his quest to identify with divine or heroic figures (Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 140). Meanwhile, John Paulini offers an in-depth critical analysis of Caligula's portraits, noting how they were used to construct his public image and enhance his political legitimacy within the imperial system. In his essay "A Pre-Principate Portrait of Gaius (Caligula)?", he discusses an early statue from before he acceded to the throne, showing how his sculptural representations played a crucial role in establishing his identity within the Roman hierarchy. In his later works, Pollini shows how Caligula's portraits shifted from traditional representations of authority to exaggerated self-portraits, reflecting his growing narcissism and need for absolute control.

John Pollini, "A Pre-Principate Portrait of Gaius (Caligula)?" *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 40 (1982):1-12; John Pollini, *The Portraiture of Gaius and Lucius Caesar* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987); John Pollini, "The Image of Caligula: Myth and Reality," in *New Studies on the Portrait of Caligula in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*, ed. Peter Schertz and Bernard Frischer (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 115-134.

[2] Tac. *Annals* 15.38.

[3] In the early chapters, Reich sees that authoritarian leaders employ body language—such as a tendency to stand firmly, gestures, and a specific tone of voice—as initial persuasion tools for their audiences, before proceeding with any actual actions.

Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Vincent R. Carfagno (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), chap. 1–2.

[4] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 72. See also Robert Hogan and James Fico, "Leadership," in *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Treatments*, ed. W. Keith Campbell and Joshua D. Miller (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 393–402.

burns beneath his feet[1]. The statues of Nero clearly display the features of a carefully crafted physical narcissism designed to serve political and personal ends. These traits can be understood within the context of Nero's evolution from a young ruler supported by advisors (such as Seneca and Burrus) to an autocratic emperor who embodied the image of the "New Rome."

Nero gradually adopted a self-glorifying style that exaggerated his image beyond that of a mere ruler. His statues typically depict him with soft features, polished skin, and a youthful face, devoid of any expressions of weakness or tension[2]. This style is consistent with Salvesen's theory of "narcissistic concealment," which aims to project a purely idealized image as a psychological defense mechanism on the political level[3]. Many scholars have questioned Nero's artistic talent, and there is a consensus among researchers that these preoccupations were socially unacceptable for a Roman emperor belonging to the ruling class. However, they have been interpreted as part of Nero's self-project to create a heroic and glorified image of himself[4]. He sought excessive admiration and a sense of entitlement, which he would enjoy through the thunderous applause he would generate after each performance. Although he had no reason to worry about winning, Nero is said to have been extremely nervous when entering competitions[5]. Consequently, statues of Nero bear clear narcissistic features, characterized by self-aggrandizement and a reluctance to express weaknesses, consistent with the results of narcissistic trait tests that measure exaggerated self-confidence and a need for admiration[6]. For example, his statues depict the divine form, like the Colossus of Rome, in addition to depicting the finger-pointing position, denying the accusation and pointing it at the viewer. This is a symbol of the submission that the narcissist always seeks with his victims[7] (Fig. 1).

A quick analysis of the body language in Nero's statues reveals that rigid body language, a slight forward tilt of the head, a focused but lifeless gaze, tight shoulders, and a closed or tense hand position reflect internal psychological conflicts, such as

[1] Tacitus, *Annals* 15.38–44) states that Nero was not in Rome when the fire broke out, but later rumors depict him playing the lyre and singing about the "fall of Troy" as he watched the flames from his palace. Suetonius also wrote that Nero "watched the fire from his palace and was delighted by its beauty" (Suetonius, Nero 38). Dio Cassius, however, considers that Nero was indeed singing about the fall of Troy as he watched the fire, a symbolic depiction of his narcissism (Dio Cassius, Roman History, 62.18.1). See also: Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (London: Routledge, 1984), 77–79; Champlin, *Nero*, 4–6, where Champlin argues that this image was a "symbolic retelling" of Nero's artistic rather than realistic image, but it remains powerful as an expression of his political narcissism.

[2] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 87–89.

[3] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 51.

[4] Nero often relied so heavily on them that they no longer had any need to extol him, as was the case with his mother and Seneca. His skill at playing the lyre, singing, and acting alone demonstrates his need for excessive admiration. The allegation that he kicked a pregnant Poppaea to death after she criticized his stage performance further illustrates this point. Gardner, "Nero Tyrannus," 25&33.

[5] Suet. *Nero*. 23.3; Dio. 61.21.2

[6] Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions*, 109; Raskin and Terry, "Principal-Components Analysis," 890.

[7] Allan Pease, *Body Language: How to Read Others' Thoughts by Their Gestures*, Overcoming Common Problems (Oxford: University Printing House, 1988), 30, fig. 19

anxiety, repressed anger[1], or a need for control and fear of losing power[2]. We note the emergence of clear changes compared to his predecessors[3].

First, the hair:

The narcissistic hairstyle of individuals with narcissistic tendencies is characterized by an elaborate and overly carefully organized style, as hair is considered a visible extension of the ideal self that the narcissist seeks to impose on those around him[4]. The narcissist often pays meticulous attention to styling his hair to reflect an idealized image of himself, enhancing his sense of control, perfection, and distinction from others[5]. This style is not merely an expression of taste; it is also considered "display behavior driven by the need for admiration," according to the classification of analytical psychology[6]. Carefully groomed and styled hair becomes part of the artistic display used by the narcissist to amplify his self-image and enhance his sense of exclusivity and uniqueness[7].

Emperor Nero was distinguished by his intricate, carefully sculpted hairstyles, preferring to present himself with a unique and elegant appearance that set him apart from previous emperors. This attention to detail in hair sculpting may reflect a desire to impose a unique aesthetic image, expressing a distinct and individual self (Fig. 5)[8] and (Fig. 6)[9], which is a characteristic of narcissism. He did not use it simply to express the hair fashion of the time or to signify personal taste. Rather, within the framework of narcissism, it is understood as a manifestation of the "narcissistic mask," where the narcissist seeks to construct an ideal external image that covers internal fragility or disturbances in identity or legitimacy.

[1] Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, *The Facial Action Coding System: A Technique for the Measurement of Facial Movement* (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1969), 230

[2] Ekman and Friesen, *Facial Action Coding System*, 230

[3] It differs from the balanced idealism depicted in the sculptures and portraits of earlier emperors such as Augustus, highlighting a shift in artistic language and reflecting the crisis of power in the era of Nero.

[4] Elsa Ronning Stam, *Identifying and Understanding the Narcissistic Personality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 94–96.

[5] Vaknin, Sam. *Malignant Self-Love: Narcissism Revisited*, 6th ed. (Skopje: Narcissus Publications, 2007), 119.

[6] Million, Theodore. *Personality Disorders in Modern Life*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 401–402.

[7] Kohut, *Analysis of the Self*, 124; Ronningstam, *Identifying and Understanding*, 95.

[8] Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, *217–219;* Dietrich Boschung, *Die Bildnisse des Nero* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1993)*, Plate 45, Cat. no. 60; https://images.app.goo.gl/W8dTfqMNXjdV54oh9*

[9] Bust of Emperor Nero from the Capitoline Museum (Roman Art) – Archive

(Fig. 5)

(Fig. 6)

This portrait is one of the most prominent official portraits of Emperor Nero, depicting him in his youth with features full of psychological and political significance[1]. The portrait features wavy hair carefully styled over the forehead, with curved eyebrows that give the face a sharp, penetrating look, reinforcing interpretations associated with "imperial narcissism."

The emperor sought to visually reinforce his image through art. The attention paid to highlighting his unique features is evident through the styling of his hair, full neck, and prominent jaw, emulating classical Greek models. Dietrich Buschung suggests that this portrait belongs to what is known as the "Nero Glyptotek style," named after the version preserved in the Glyptothek Museum in Munich. This style was one of the most widely used visual styles of Nero towards the end of his reign, reinforcing his image as both an artistic leader and a godlike figure.[2]

Second, the Hard Gaze:

According to Salvesen (2013), narcissistic individuals display a "hard gaze," or what is known as the authoritarian gaze, indicating an attempt to impose visual dominance[3]. Nero's statues, especially portraits from his late reign, are characterized by wide, always-open eyes, with slightly raised eyebrows, suggesting vigilance and surveillance mixed with constant arousal and anticipation. All of these ultimately convey dominance and excessive confidence.

[1] Several surviving statues of Nero are attributed to his late reign (after 59 AD) and show a gradual evolution from a conservative republican style to a more individualistic and narcissistic style. Polished white marble was used to highlight the full features of the face and details were carefully crafted to enhance the impression of personal presence and majesty. Fred Kleiner notes that “Nero’s Phyllisic style recasts beauty according to the will of the emperor, not according to classical ideals” Fred S. Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2010), 221.

[2] Boschung, *Bildnisse des Nero*, pl.. 45, nr. 60.

[3] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 52.

Thirdly, The Eyebrows:

The eyebrows are one of the most important indicators of facial language, reflecting psychological state and personality traits. In the case of narcissism, the eyebrows are formed in a way that displays excessive confidence or defiance, and there is often a contraction or tension in the surrounding muscles, sending physical signals to others regarding the state of self-centeredness.[1]. In many statues and portraits, Nero's eyebrows appear raised and tense, thus reflecting a sense of nervous tension. This tendency toward a sharp or arrogant expression reflects a desire to appear powerful and dominant, along with a tendency toward narcissism[2], as the eyebrows express dominance and self-absorption. This narcissistic body language is likely due to the way Nero's statues and portraits are sculpted to reflect his desire for admiration and obedience, two essential traits of narcissistic leaders.

Fourth: Elevated Chin Posture:

This posture is one of the most prominent nonverbal indicators of narcissism. Body language studies confirm that raising the chin is a form of cognitive elevation, giving the illusion of biological superiority[3]. This is reflected in portraits and statues of Nero, which often depict him with his head slightly tilted back and his chin raised, creating an aura of artificial grandeur. (Fig. 2) This raised chin emulates the arrogance that was reflected in Nero's behavior in the last years of his reign when he killed his mother Agrippina, and then Seneca, and rejected any form of opposition.[4]

Neutral and Stiff Facial Expressions (Impassive Face): Nero's statues lack any human emotional expression. This is interpreted by researcher Paul Zanker as a strategy for constructing a superhuman image, closer to God than to human[5]. This reflects Nero's rejection of transparency or human communication, embodied in his famous play when he sang while watching Rome burn in 64 AD, according to Suetonius[6]. According to Zanker's estimations, Nero created his statues to become a substitute for the state itself; he was not an emperor but a tangible manifestation of the empire.[7]

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[1] Beck, *Cognitive Therapy*, 145

[2] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 74-75.

[3] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 48; Abigail A. Marsh, Henry H. Yu, Julia C. Schechter, and R. J. R. Blair, "Larger than Life: Humans' Nonverbal Status Cues Alter Perceived Size," *PLOS ONE* 4, no. 5 (2009): e5707.

[4] Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.8–10 The murder of Agrippina and Seneca's suicide (15.60–64) are discussed in further studies that analyze the psychological dynamics of Nero's power, focusing on both symbolic and physical repression.

Griffin, *Nero*, 82–88, 142–145. Champlin, *Nero*, 96–101, 146–150. Shadi Bartsch, *Ideology in Cold Blood: A Reading of Lucan's Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 145–147.

[5] Zanker, Art of Persuasion, 125

[6] Suetonius, *Nero*, 38

[7] Zanker, Art of Persuasion, 131

A straight neck and raised shoulders:

Indicate defensive readiness and physical solidity, which are physical signs associated with defensive narcissistic behavior, as he describes it.[1]

In general, the exaggerated facial features shown by some statues of Nero, with a full face and pursed lips, indicate an attempt at visual self-aggrandizement. These references are consistent with the historical figure of Nero, known for his pursuit of self-deification.

Roman Imperial coinage was a powerful tool for political propaganda, used to portray Nero and Caligula in a way that reinforced their narcissistic traits. The excessive facial detailing and exaggerated head-to-body proportions on coins reflect his attempt to impose an idealized image of himself, associated with divine beauty or imperial supremacy.

Nero is usually depicted on coins in profile with a long neck, a prominent chin, and carefully curled hair—artistic attributes that amplify his personal presence (Fig. 8)[2]. On some later coins (from 64–68 AD), his face is exaggeratedly puffy, suggesting self-satisfaction or personal deification (Fig. 7) [3]. His image is often accompanied by symbolic phrases such as Divus Nero (God Nero) or phrases glorifying his name, as on the coin (Fig. 8), a direct reference to the narcissistic self-centeredness of imperial rhetoric.[4]

(Fig. 7)

(Fig. 8)

It is noteworthy that Nero's face varied from one era to another on coins, portraits, and statues. This is per Gardner's study on the physiological and psychosomatic causes

[1] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 72

[2] Quinarius Aureus - Nero (VICT AVG; Victory) - Roman Empire (27 BC - 395 AD) – Numista

[3] Aureus (Coin) Portraying Emperor Nero | The Art Institute of Chicago

[4] Caroline Vout, "The Rhetoric of the Body in Imperial Portraiture," in *Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture*, ed. Jaś Elsner and Michel Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 89–112.

of Nero's authoritarian legacy. She demonstrated that Nero suffered from Cushing's syndrome[1] at some point in his life. This is not a psychological illness but rather a physical one that can produce psychological symptoms resembling some aspects of narcissism, especially in cases involving significant physical changes that affect self-esteem[2]. Therefore, linking the two is useful in historical psychoanalysis, as in the case of Emperor Nero[3]. In Cayce Walker's study, he concluded that Nero suffered from psychosis, a symptom of schizophrenia[4] that affects a person's way of thinking, feeling, and behavior and is the result of abuse or trauma experienced since childhood[5].

Many visible signs associated with Cushing's can be seen in photographs of a patient included in a clinical case study. Photographs A and B show a patient with Cushing's syndrome with its classic presentation (Fig. 9). The following images (C and D) show the same patient eighteen months after surgery to remove a pituitary tumor (which was the cause of his symptoms).

These images strikingly reflect how a person's appearance can change with Cushing's syndrome. Comparing these images with the images on Nero's coins reveals a clear correlation. The images of Nero show an enlarged moon face that clearly resembles the patient's in (Fig. 7) [6], as well as a fatty mass behind the neck and small fatty deposits between the eyebrows. Although the patient in images C and D has not fully recovered from the effects of the syndrome, the dramatic change is still evident[7].

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[1] Cushing's syndrome is a hormonal disorder that occurs when cortisol levels in the body remain elevated for an extended period. This can happen due to the body's natural overproduction of cortisol, often caused by a tumor in the adrenal or pituitary gland, or as a result of long-term use of cortisone medications like prednisone. The main causes of Cushing's syndrome include a pituitary tumor (known as Cushing's disease) and an adrenal tumor.

[2] Suetonius, Nero. 51. describes Emperor Nero as having a thick neck, a protruding belly, and extremely thin legs (cervice obesa, ventre proiecto, gracillimis cruribus) in his work. Trimble analyzes this description as more than just a physical characterization; she views it as a satirical literary device that points to moral deviance and self-aggrandizement. She supports her argument by noting that, despite Suetonius's portrayal, Nero's statues present an idealized and well-proportioned physique. According to Trimble, this reflects a deliberate effort to create a distinction between the head and the stereotypical body in imperial statues, serving as a strategy to hide the true nature of the emperor beneath an "authoritarian or politically invested body." Trimble, “Corpore Enormi”, 129

[3] Gardner, "Nero Tyrannus," 20.

[4] C. Walker, "The Reign of Nero: A Delusional Journey to Suicide" (PhD diss., University of Mary Washington, 2020),13.

[5] Ingo Schäfer and Helen L. Fisher, “Childhood Trauma and Psychosis—What Is the Evidence?” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 13, no. 3 (2011): 361; Yael Dvir, Brian Denietolis, and Jean A. Frazier, "Childhood Trauma and Psychosis," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 22, no. 4 (2013): 630-631.

[6] Gardner, "Nero Tyrannus,", fig. 22, 20.

[7] Gardner examined the depiction of Nero's obesity on coins, beginning with the earliest representation of him without his mother, Agrippina, and tracing the progression to his later, more pronounced obesity. She noted that this obesity was concentrated in specific areas of his body rather than being evenly distributed. Additionally, she sought to explore historical sources to demonstrate that Nero's obesity was not solely attributable to gluttony and greed. Gardner, "Nero Tyrannus," 20.

Nero's appearance at the beginning of his reign was closer to that of images C and D, as seen in (Fig. 8), but he quickly changed to resemble the patient in images A and B, as in (Fig. 7). It is important to pay special attention to the man's facial features; In post-surgery photos, his chin, mouth, nose, and eyes appear prominent, whereas in earlier photos, these features were distorted and hidden under a layer of swollen fatty tissue. With Cushing's syndrome, the face swells not only due to fat deposits but also due to fluid retention resulting from hormonal imbalances, leading to swelling of the face and hands and fat deposits between the shoulders (known as the "buffalo hump"). Several studies indicate that men with Cushing's often suffer from a lack of facial hair and possibly impotence, due to a testosterone deficiency.[1]

Given Nero's reputation, it might seem unlikely that he would have suffered from such a symptom, but even if he suffered from erectile dysfunction, that doesn't necessarily mean he was unable to have sex at all.[2]

(Fig. 9)

[1] Alberto Giacinto Ambrogio, Martina De Martin, Paola Ascoli, Francesco Cavagnini, and Francesca Pecori Giraldi, "Gender-dependent Changes in Haematological Parameters in Patients with Cushing's Disease Before and After Remission," *European Journal of Endocrinology* 170, no. 3 (2014): 393-400; Gardner, "Nero Tyrannus", 20-21; Farida Chentli, Said Azzoug, Djamila Meskine, Fetta-Amel Yaker, Fadila Chabour, and Hayet Boudina, "Gonadal Function in Men with Cushing Syndrome," *Journal of Endocrinology and Diabetes Mellitus (Synergy)* 2, no. 1 (2004): 4-8. H. Vierhapper, P. Nowotny, and W. Waldhäusl, "Production Rates of Testosterone in 39 Patients with Cushing's Syndrome," *Metabolism: Clinical and Experimental* 49, no. 2 (2000): 229-31.

[2] Nero's controversial reputation might lead some to think that he was unlikely to experience symptoms such as erectile dysfunction. However, Gardner's analysis suggests that he was probably not as sexually active as often rumored, especially when compared to emperors like Augustus or Caligula. It is possible that he suffered from a testosterone deficiency, a common symptom of Cushing's syndrome, which could help explain his atypical sexual behavior. Gardner, "Nero Tyrannus," 21-22.

Costume

The costumes worn by Emperor Nero were characterized by a showy quality that can be interpreted in the light of psychoanalysis as a "narcissistic mask," concealing inner fragility and mounting political turmoil[1]. Through this elaborate artistic appearance, Nero sought to impose a superior and idealized self-image, enhancing his legitimacy and concealing the conflicts that threatened his authority[2]. This phenomenon aligns with what is known in narcissistic psychology as the compensatory role of the outer mask[3], whereby lavish appearances are used as a defense mechanism to conceal feelings of insecurity or weakness[4]. Nero's clothing in imperial statues was characterized by religious and political symbols intended to enhance his legitimacy as a divine emperor. Nero is often depicted wearing the toga, which represents Roman civil authority, with decorative additions inspired by the clothing of the gods, such as the ornate royal robe (*paludamentum*) [5], which signifies military power and imperial dominance over the state through its distinctive color, purple [6].

The wearing of the *paludamentum* by the Roman emperor was not merely an aesthetic choice or a military tradition; it formed a key element in the artistic language of Romanization, especially in the provinces. It represented the emperor as a supernatural, semi-divine leader who monopolized military and political legitimacy[7]. This robe was associated in statues, frescoes, and coins with the image of the victorious ruler. It sent clear messages to the public that the emperor was not merely a military leader but the embodiment of Roman sovereignty and imperial unity[8]. It is one of the narcissistic symbols of absolute power[9].

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[1] Ronningstam, *Identifying and Understanding*, 45–49.

[2] Sam Vaknin, *Malignant Self-Love: Narcissism Revisited*, 6th ed. (Skopje: Narcissus Publications, 2007) 223–228.

[3] Jung, *Archetypes*, 36.

[4] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 121–125.

[5] The paludamentum was a long military cloak worn by Roman commanders (imperatores) and senior military officers. It was draped tightly over the right shoulder, leaving the right arm free, and served as a symbol of supreme military authority in the Roman army. Typically made of heavy wool, the cloak was often dyed purple or blood red, setting its wearers apart from ordinary soldiers who wore the simpler sagum. It is believed that only the emperor was permitted to wear a fully purple paludamentum, which further reinforced its status as a symbol of imperialism in addition to its military significance. During the Imperial period, this cloak was also commonly depicted in reliefs and statues of emperors, associating them with the prestige of victorious leaders. (*imperator*).

Judith Lynn Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante, eds., *The World of Roman Costume* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 67–70; Alexandra Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Stroud: Tempus, 2000), 95–97.

[6] Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 125

[7] Sebesta and Bonfante, *World of Roman Costume*, 69–72.

[8] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 5–9, 123–128.

[9] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 60.

Some statues of Emperor Nero featured decorative elements[1] resembling musical notations[2], whether in the form of embroidery on the robes or inscriptions, a symbolic reference to his passion for the arts, particularly music. However, this visual use was not limited to expressing artistic inclinations; it was also understood as a deliberate tool to assert his uniqueness and symbolic distinction from previous emperors, reflecting a manifestation of imperial narcissism in official art[3].

Bodily Patterns in Historical Sources

Tacinus mentions that Nero "*swayed while walking as if on a stage*".[4]

"He said, *'When angry, his eyes would flash while his lips would be pursed in an unnatural way'".*

Artistic Analysis of Statues

Nero's narcissism can be applied through studying his statue depicted as Apollo, preserved in the Vatican Museum, through:

•**Godlike posture**: 20-degree inclination with unnatural weight distribution

•**Hand gesture**: Exaggeratedly extended finger (narcissistic index[5])

•**Fine details**: Curly hair crafted with precision surpassing that of contemporary statues

Theatricality Index: Calculated based on:

A. Analysis of Movement Dynamics:

•Repetition of exaggerated gestures in literary and historical sources

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[1] Nero had a deep passion for the arts. For instance, he was particularly enthusiastic about the theater and was often compared to Orestes from Greek mythology, who famously killed his mother (Suet.Nero 21.3). Nero also had talents in chariot racing and music. His interest in poetry is highlighted by two conflicting accounts: one suggests that he plagiarized the works of others and claimed them as his own, while the other emphasizes his genuine talent for composing poems. Tacitus notes that Nero was enthusiastic about poetry and surrounded himself with skilled poets who composed works for him. However, Suetonius claims that Nero easily composed verses and did not publish others' works as his own (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.16.1; Suet. Nero 52.1). During one of his celebrations, Nero established a group of five thousand soldiers known as the Augustans (Suet. Nero 20.3). Their primary role was to applaud Nero during his performances. Despite their own feelings, the rest of the audience often joined in, praising the emperor as if genuinely enjoying the shows. They would chant phrases such as, "Glorious Caesar, Apollo, our Augustus, Pythian victor, we swear by you, O Caesar, that no one can surpass you" (Dio 62.20.3-5). At the Neronian Games, all the prizes for the lyre competitions were awarded to him, as he was deemed the only artist worthy of victory. Suet. Nero. 12.3; Dio. 61.21.1-2

[2] Nero started to learn how to play the lyre and practiced exercises that artists followed to care for and strengthen their voices. He avoided foods that could harm his voice, even though it was weak and low-pitched. Gradually, he developed a strong desire to perform on stage, often repeating the Greek proverb to his close friends: "Practicing music in secret is worthless. "Suet. Nero. 20.1. "*nullum esse respectum*".

[3] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 48

[4] Tac., *Annales*, 14.15, ed. J. Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 322, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 142.

[5] R.R.R. Smith, "Nero and the Sun-God: Divine Accessories and Political Symbols in Roman Imperial Portraits", Journal of Roman Archaeology, 13 (2000): 535.

•Personal movement space in artworks

•Description of hand gestures in historical narratives

B. Analysis of Unconventional Movement:

•Singing during the Fires of Rome: A spectacle of physical performance[1].

•Racing in the Olympics: A violation of the rules of the royal body[2].

Nero's transgression against Roman physical standards can thus be identified by:

~40% more gestures (compared to Augustus).

~35%more physical contact with others than Augustus[3].

~30% more frequent depictions of him in godlike poses.

Art as a Psycho-Political Projection in Caligula's Reign:

Caligula's reign (37–41 AD) began with immense popularity after the death of Tiberius, but the situation quickly turned sour due to his tyrannical and bloody behavior. According to Suetonius, his final years were "possessed by megalomania," as he began to openly deify himself and force the Senate and the people to treat him like a god[4].

This was in addition to numerous psychopathic behaviors[5], such as the fact that Caligula led smear campaigns against his sisters during his reign. He accused his sisters,

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[1] Tac. *Annales*, 15.39, Catharine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 102-105.

[2] Donald G. Kyle, Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 246-248; Suet. Nero 24, in The Twelve Caesars, trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin, 1957), 221. Kyle describes how Nero deviated from the tradition of royal participation in the Olympic Games in 67 AD.

[3] Physical contact time refers to the duration a person engages in physical interactions with others, such as shaking hands, touching an arm, or kissing. This time is measured as a percentage of recorded social interactions in historical sources. Notably, emperors like Nero and Caligula engaged in physical contact more frequently than the Roman norm allowed. Traditionally, nobles were expected to maintain a distance of about 1.2 meters from the emperor and limit physical contact to brief moments during formal occasions. For instance, Suetonius reports that Caligula compelled women to kiss his feet for extended periods (Suet. Caligula, 26.2). Similarly, Dio Cassius notes that Nero hugged senators inappropriately, deviating from expected social boundaries; Dio Cassius. *Roman History* 61.19; John Smith, *Quantifying Imperial Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Table 4.3, 89.

[4] Suet. *Caligula*, 22–27

[5] J. Lucas, "Un empereur psychopathe : Contribution à la psychologie du Caligula de Suétone," *L'Antiquité Classique* 36, no. 1 (1967): 159ff; Vincent Mahé, "Caligula: A Psychopathological Analysis," *L'Information Psychiatrique* 97, no. 7 (2021): 607–613.

In his study, Lucas analyzes Caligula's personality through a psychological interpretation of Suetonius's writings. He argues that Caligula's political actions and behaviors go beyond mere political madness, reflecting clear and severe psychological disorders. Lucas discusses how images and portraits of Caligula functioned as expressions of his obsession with grandeur and divinity. He highlights the transformation of these portraits from youthful representations to symbolic embodiments of total power, interpreting these changes in the context of disturbances in imperial identity. Meanwhile, Mahé provides a contemporary psychological analysis of Caligula's personality using modern psychiatric criteria. He suggests that Caligula suffered from psychopathic and narcissistic disorders, explaining how these conditions affected his exercise of power. Mahé identifies specific behavioral traits that portray Caligula as a psychologically disturbed ruler and discusses how grandiose delusions contributed to his violence and political instability.

Julia and Agrippina the Younger, of having an illicit relationship with Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, the husband of their sister Drusilla and Caligula's close friend, and condemned He accused his two sisters of numerous immoral acts before the Senate and exiled them to the Pontian Islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea.[1]

Suetonius (Caligula 50) records that Caligula would stand in front of a mirror and deliberately practice his frightening facial expressions, even though his face was naturally "hideous and repulsive." This daily practice in front of a mirror is not only an indication of an obsession with appearance; it is also directly indicative of the behaviors of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), characterized by an excessive preoccupation with one's image in front of others and with one's own perceptions. Furthermore, Caligula chose stereotypical, symmetrical, and idealized bodies for his statues, reflecting his desire to present a superhuman, non-human image of himself, transcending reality toward the archetype of the god-emperor[2].

- **Impact on Artistic Depiction**:

The elimination of psychological realism: The statues depict Caligula with a smooth, expressionless face, at the height of his turbulent rule. Some scholars have considered this a sign of the denial of reality and the freezing of time within the image of power. In what is known as narcissistic abstraction[3]: Statues were a means of representation and even became cult icons, intended to convince the masses of the existence of a transcendent being above criticism[4], even when the empire was suffering economically and politically.

Historians' Support:

Suetonius mentions that Caligula:

"He ordered statues of himself to be carved with the features of Zeus or Dionysus, and hung them on temples as symbols of his worship[5]."

Tacitus also recounts how "*the manifestations of power were transformed into personal displays, and collective rule was discarded in favor of rituals glorifying the emperor's personality*[6]."

Third: The Historical Projection of Caligula's Personality

Narcissism: A Phenomenon of Superiority and Harm

Suetonius recounts that Caligula saw himself as the embodiment of Jupiter and imposed his worship in temples[7]. He "stood unbalanced, with a slumped shoulder and

[1] Dio. 59.22, 6-9.
[2] Trimble, "Corpore Enormi", 118–119.
[3] Claudia Fadda, "Neurological and Neuropsychiatric Diseases through the Lens of Roman Sculpture," *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 4, no. 1 (2021): 1–25.
[4] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Roman Portrait Sculpture: The Stylistic Cycle," last modified October 2000, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ropo/hd_ropo.htm.
[5] *Suet. Caligula*, 22.
[6] *Tac., Annals*, 4.67.
[7] Suet. *Caligula*, 22

an exaggeratedly high head[1]." "When walking, he moved his arms in an uncoordinated manner as if he were crushing imaginary air.[2]" He also required senators to kiss his feet upon entering the palace—an extreme narcissistic gesture of physical dominance[3].

The imperial sculptures of Emperor Caligula reflect a clear narcissistic presence, often depicted with sharp features and a grim face expressing sternness and sternness. The body language of his statues also embodies a tendency to impose control in a strict visual style; harsh expressions and fixed gazes suggest pride and superiority. Caligula deliberately employed this political art to construct a near-divine image for himself as part of a governance strategy aimed at enhancing his narcissistic self and consolidating his authority as an absolute ruler who brooked no opposition or criticism. This skillful use of art as a tool for symbolic dominance is consistent with what researchers have observed of a tendency in imperial art to consecrate the image of the ruler as a superhuman being, endowed with divine legitimacy and with an ideal body free from defects or psychological tension (emotions), even at the height of political crises[4].

The Body as a Tool for Subjugating Others

Despite Caligula's short reign (37–41 AD), his statues—particularly the bust preserved in the Louvre—were characterized by a deliberate artistic style that deliberately imposed the image of the emperor as an absolute entity, with a stern and unemotional presence. According to artistic analysis, Caligula constructed an image that bore no comparison: he was younger than many senators, but he wanted to appear more powerful and less human. His statue is a denial of his humanity, a demonstration of his superhuman status, and a classic example of narcissistic leaders fostering a superhuman image that serves to obstruct rational assessment by others[5].

Suetonius likened Caligula to a "goat," perhaps more than just a superficial irony. Trimble explains that the goat symbolized lasciviousness, irrationality, and untamed animal nature. Thus, likening Caligula to them entails a double narcissistic reduction: on the one hand, he is stripped of his humane imperial character, and on the other, he is associated with what is bestial and perverted. This reinforces the impression that

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[1] Suet. Caligula 50.1, in Lives of the Caesars, trans. J.C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 31 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 1:452-455.

[2] Suet. Caligula 50.3

[3] Suet. *Caligula*, 26

[4] John Pollini, *Roman Portraiture: Images of Character and Virtue* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Fisher Gallery, 1990), 24–31; Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustu;* Rosemarie Trentinella, "Roman Portrait Sculpture: The Stylistic Cycle," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003), accessed August 4, 2025 https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ropo2/hd_ropo2.htm.

[5] Studies indicate that narcissistic leaders aim to construct an inflated self-image characterized by grandeur and superiority, which renders their actions and opinions unquestionable. This concept is referred to as "narcissistic supply." Such leaders utilize speeches, gestures, images, and sculptures as tools to manipulate their audience, maintaining control, disrupting rational thinking, and silencing dissent and criticism. As a result, their followers become unable to think objectively. W. Keith Campbell and Joshua D. Miller, *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Treatments* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011), 282–284.

Caligula was a narcissistic, monstrous being, unadulterated by logic and self-consciousness[1].

Fred Kleiner says that Caligula's statues follow the model of "Serene Divinity," but in an overly abstract manner, as if they represent what should not be questioned. This is evident in the complete absence of emotion from the features, as if he were the embodiment of the saying, "I am the authority, nothing more, nothing less[2]."

As Paul Zanker points out, "Caligula did not want to be seen as a human emperor, but rather as a concrete manifestation of the will of the gods[3]."

First, hair:

The hairstyles used in statues of emperors—or in what is known as political art for its use in political propaganda—demonstrate that hair was not merely a matter of aesthetics, but rather a symbolic tool. Excessive attention to it can express narcissistic behavior, as it is used as a means of self-promotion, displaying distinction and uniqueness, and imposing psychological visual dominance over the viewer[4].

Thus, Roman statues depicting Caligula, such as the bust housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art, display elaborate, curly hairstyles with fine details that emphasize the forehead and the sculpted, hanging locks, giving him a youthful, elegant appearance, unlike previous imperial representations[5]. This use of outward appearance reflects what psychologists call "aesthetic or visual illusions" used to impose symbolic control over viewers, consistent with narcissistic strategies of self-enhancement through outward appearance[6]. Even his hairstyles on coins are exaggerated in order to attract attention (Fig. 13), naturally appearing long and intricate, filling the back of the neck. Caligula's hairstyles were distinctive and often designed to emphasize power and control, with sharp, structured lines reflecting the image of a tyrannical ruler who was attentive to every detail of his appearance[7], as we previously explained with Nero. Such hairstyles reflect the "mask" that the narcissist imposes on others to demonstrate dominance.

During Caligula's reign, his statues became a propaganda tool with a religious ritualistic character. He was often depicted in the form of gods (such as Zeus or Apollo), indicating a collective narcissistic projection through sculptural techniques.

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[1] Trimble, “Corpore Enormi”, 126.

[2] Kleiner, *History of Roman Art*, 197.

[3] Zanker, Art of Persuasion, 97.

[4] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 5.

[5] Dietrich Boschung, *Die Bildnisse des Caligula*, Das römische Herrscherbild I.4 (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1989), 29 n12; 38-39, 53-57, 90, 110; cat. no. 12, fig. 12; pl. 12;

https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103SXA

[6] Nancy McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 243–245; Ronningstam, *Identifying and Understanding*, 25-30.

[7] Alain Gowing, *Empire and Image: Art and Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 89.

The use of pure white marble, usually reserved for the gods, demonstrates his desire to "deify himself" and break down the distinction between humans and gods—a well-known characteristic of pathological narcissistic behavior, according to Salvesen's analysis[1].

Second, Stoic Frown

A prominent behavioral characteristic of narcissistic leaders, especially those belonging to the grandiose narcissism pattern, is the deliberate suppression of outward emotions, not only as a strategy for regulating emotions but also as a symbolic means of demonstrating self-control and imposing dominance over others. According to contemporary psychological studies, narcissists choose to conceal feelings of anxiety, weakness, or anger, creating an artificial image of strength and emotional control. This behavior, which falls under the concept of "expressive suppression,"[2] not only conceals internal tensions but also disrupts rational assessment of others, as the reading of the character is replaced by the illusion of their apparent perfection and stability. This mechanism applies to representations of Caligula and Nero, where the absence of clear emotional expression is noted in imperial sculptural and symbolic portraits, replaced by calm, commanding features that lend a superhuman quality to their official image. This "emotional indifference" is used here as a political and artistic strategy that enhances prestige and weakens the ability to challenge this image.

The seated statue of Caligula, housed in the Louvre, displays a tightly closed mouth and downturned corners of the lips, an expression that suggests sternness rather than sadness. Salvesen describes this pattern as a "defensive immobility" that indicates emotional dominance and the suppression of natural interaction[3]. (Fig. 10)[4]

The seated marble statue, attributed to the Emperor Caligula and housed in the Louvre (Louvre, inv. Ma 1267), reflects a complex dimension in the expression of power. Although the toga and the stillness of the body suggest an imperial image, the subtle gesture of the left hand—holding the hem of the robe near the chest—opens the way for a symbolic reading that counters the image of power. This pose, which might traditionally be understood as a symbol of rhetoric or poise, reflects, in the context of psychoanalysis of the imperial body, what could be considered a subtle sign of internal tension. The body does not extend outward as in the adlocution poses but rather shrinks in on itself. The rigid sitting position and the clenched hands also suggest a desire for closure rather than openness, which contradicts the symbolic discourse of Roman authority, which consists of interaction with the people. Compared to Nero, who sought to construct an artificial, hyper-dominant image through the body and drama, this seated statue appears more fragile, attempting to contain an unstable proportion through an external appearance of poise that does not conceal internal anxiety. This pose can be understood as an early manifestation of what researchers call "fragility hidden behind

[1] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 52.

[2] Sarah A. Walker et al., "Primary and Secondary Psychopathy Relate to Lower Cognitive Reappraisal: A Meta-Analysis of the Dark Triad and Emotion Regulation Processes," *Personality and Individual Differences* 183 (January 2022): 111–118; Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 64.

[3] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 64.

[4] statue - Louvre site des collections, inv. MA 1267

showmanship," a characteristic associated with a defensive or anxious narcissism[1]. In the statues of Caligula, particularly the bust preserved in the Louvre (Fig. 4), what can be described as "the ideal type of imperial narcissism" is evident through several recurring artistic features that indicate the creation of a transcendent self-image:

First, meticulous scraping and polishing techniques are used to produce an extreme smoothness in the skin surface, achieving a near-perfect appearance. This is consistent with the idea of representing the emperor as a regenerative, incorruptible entity, as Jane Fejfer points out in the context of imperial portraiture, where the importance of luxurious surface treatment as a means of glorifying political power is more evident than mere aesthetic representation[2].

Second, the upward orientation of the head with the gaze fixed toward the horizon appears in statues from the Augustan period and the Julio-Claudian family. This is an artistic element that suggests "cognitive transcendence" and a symbolic transcendence of reality. Paul Zankir sees this style of depiction as directed toward presenting the emperor as a cosmic force transcending the existence of the ordinary individual[3].

Third, Andrew Wallace Hadrill's study suggests that physical immobility and impassive facial expressions were a deliberate strategy to embody an unshakable imperial figure, reinforcing the symbolism of absolute, unquestionable authority[4].

Depiction of the Eyebrows:

In statues of Nero and Caligula, the symbolic image of raised, taut, and knitted eyebrows is noticeable, lending nervous tension and a hint of arrogance to the faces. Researchers interpret this pose as an artistic element that reinforces the language of dominance and control: raised eyebrows reveal focused attention and emotional effort centered on narcissistic ambition, not content with radiance but also demonstrating a tendency toward superiority and domination. Diana E. E. Kleiner has documented that the meticulous sculpting of the features in Roman statues, particularly the eyebrows and forehead, was an intentional element within the “artistic program of power,” intended to convey a sense of awe and power beyond the power of words[5]. Sanders & Zanker also note that the eyebrows of emperors were sculpted to make the face appear more assertive and serious, reinforcing the oppressive appearance of the imperial portrait[6] (Fig. 4).[7]

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[1] Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 162–164. Eric R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 35–38. Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 88–90.

[2] Jane Fejfer, *Roman Portraits in Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 112–115.

[3] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 7–9.

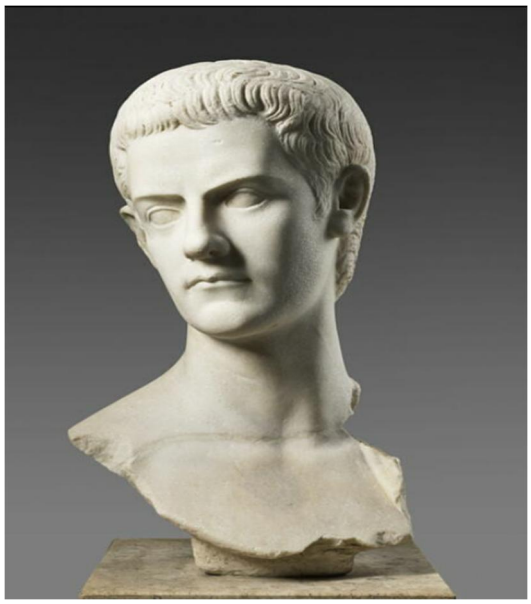
[4] Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *The Roman Emperor and His Court, c. 30 BC–c. AD 300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 105–108.

[5] Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 154–157.

[6] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 8–10.

[7] imgurl:https://collections.louvre.fr/media/cache/intermediate/0000000021/0000275388/0000829457_OG.JPG - Search

(Fig. 10)



(Fig. 11)

(Fig. 12)

Fourth: Squared Shoulders with Neutral Head

Most depictions of Caligula often depict him with his shoulders squared back. This posture, from the perspective of body language psychology, suggests a reinforcement of the "signal of declared power." This type of posture suggests narcissism based on the

pretense of absolute power. (Fig. 11) In the sculpture (Fig. 12[1]), the pronounced tilt of the head (≈15°) and the finely sculpted curls surpass those of the era, the bulging eyes with unsculpted pupils (exemplify a late Hellenistic technique)

In most statues of Caligula, the emperor is depicted in a posture that repeatedly squares his shoulders, as in the example shown in (Fig. 11[2]). From the perspective of body language psychology, this posture is considered a form of "signal of declared power[3]" which aims to create a visually dominant presence[4]. As Diana Kleiner explains in her study of Roman sculpture, the erect, open upper body posture serves to construct an "authoritative body" that asserts itself as a symbol of legitimacy and power. This physical structure reinforces what Paul Zanker calls the "visual mode of authority," which serves the emperor as a superhuman embodiment[5]. This analysis is confirmed by the bust in (Fig. 12), where subtle sculptural elements consistent with this narcissistic configuration, such as the head tilted approximately ~15 degrees, reinforce the sense of superiority and symbolic elevation. The hair, sculpted with dense, finely curled curls, exceeds the standards of most statues of the period, reflecting what Kleiner describes as a “deliberate perfection of imperial charisma[6].” This is compounded by the bulging, chiseled eyes without a sculpted pupil—a technique common in Late Hellenistic sculpture—often used to emphasize the “fixed gaze,” suggesting that the emperor is gazing into the distance, not at a specific audience[7].

Together, these elements constitute what might be called “authoritarian visual narcissism,” where the entire body is used as a medium to produce the illusion of superiority and reinforce the image of the emperor as an unbreakable psychological and physical force.

Costume:

Caligula’s statues are depicted wearing military armor (lorica segmentata[8]), in a scene intended not only to depict combat readiness but also to directly suggest dominance and authoritarian narcissism. This ornate military garb is one of the most

[1] *Roman Portraits in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987),15

[2] Marble bust of the Emperor Caligula, preserved in the Louvre Museum (Museum No. Ma1234 / MNC1276) Marble, about 47 cm high, attributed to his reign (c. 39–40 AD), after the death of his sister Drusilla in 38 AD

https://collections.louvre.fr/media/cache/intermediate/0000000021/0000275388/0000829457_OG.JPG

[3] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 71.

[4] Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 154–157.

[5] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 8–9.

[6] Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 157.

[7] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 9.

[8] It is a shield made of curved iron plates, worn to protect the torso and shoulders, and is considered one of the most prominent types of shields used by Roman soldiers, especially in the first and second centuries AD.

M. C. Bishop, *Lorica Segmentata Volume I: A Handbook of Articulated Roman Plate Armour* (Duns: Armatura Press, 2002), 1.

powerful symbols of power in imperial art, suggesting a constant readiness for war on the one hand and the embodiment of the emperor as a source of power on the other. On the other hand, he was unique in his political and military legitimacy[1]. This meaning is further accentuated when Caligula paired the shield with a headband or crown (diadem), a royal or semi-divine symbol that was not part of the Roman republican tradition. This reflects his desire to transcend traditional frameworks and assert his supremacy[2] (Fig. 4).

The Roman historian Suetonius documented in his Lives of the Twelve Caesars that Caligula often wore unusual costumes, imitating mythological heroes or gods, especially on public occasions, in an attempt to reinforce his image as a transcendent being:

"*He wore the clothes of Minerva or Aphrodite, and sometimes those of Hercules, ... with a theatrical flourish unbecoming of a ruler.*[3]"

The resort to this type of military fashion and exaggerated adornment cannot be read as a mere ritual but rather as an extension of what psychoanalysts call the "narcissistic mask"—the image imposed on society as a means of symbolic control[4], whereby the narcissist produces an inflated visual representation of himself to cover his image. His inner fragility prevents rational and impartial evaluation[5]. This visual composition in Caligula's art is read as a political and artistic strategy that exploits body language and symbols to consolidate complete individual power, where appearances become mechanisms of rule and domination.

The Emperor Caligula (37–41 AD) is often depicted on Roman coins with soft, youthful features, a high forehead, and open, staring eyes, reinforcing the impression of sharp alertness and alert authority. This visual style, linked to the idea of omnipresence, establishes the image of an emperor who never slumbers, constantly observing reality and dominating it with his gaze alone. Many coins depict Caligula alone in the center of the coin[6], or in rare cases, accompanied by women from his family, such as his mother Agrippina the Elder[7] or his grandmother Antonia[8]. He is often inscribed with the title "Father of the Fatherland" (*Pater Patriae*[9]), despite the short duration of his reign (Fig. 13).

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[1] Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 142–145

[2] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 89–91.

[3] Suet. *Caligula, 52,* RPC I 3356

[4] Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions*, 113

[5] W. Keith Campbell and Joshua D. Miller, *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Treatments* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011), 302–304.

[6] BMCRE I, Caligula, 34–36; BMCRE – *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*

[7] Michael Turner, "Faces of Power: Imperial Portraiture on Roman Coins" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2007), 18, fig.7.

[8] Gwynaeth McIntyre, "Commemorating the Past and Performing Power: Parades of Ancestors on Caligula's Coinage," *Antichthon* 57 (2023): 12.

[9] Coin no. 4 of *RPC* I, 375 RPC — Coin: 161884

This composition on coins highlights Caligula's commitment to symbolic isolation, as the coins do not depict scenes of the past. They express humility or direct references to the people but rather consecrate an artistic discourse based on self-glorification and sanctification. His solitary presence at the center of the coin is a clear declaration of transcendent self-centeredness, transcending horizontal relationships toward absolute power.

The statues reinforce this imperial self-perception through significant bodily elements, such as:

- The head angle, raised approximately 15 degrees (Fig. 4), a posture interpreted as a sign of superiority and symbolic superiority, conveying a sense of looking down from above and not engaging with the sublime reality[1].
- The position of the hands suggests a symbolic balance between violence and dominance[2].
- The distance between the feet, approximately 50 cm—30% more than the usual average (shoulder width), is a physical stance used to consecrate a scene of strength, steadfastness, and rootedness, transcending the parameters of ordinary artistic sculpture to reach a symbolic meaning of earthly control[3].
- Sitting on the thrones of the gods in some sculptural works represents a deliberate violation of sacred distance, as sitting becomes a symbolic practice of seizing divinity and imposing human sovereignty. The ritual of forcing nobles to kneel before the gods is interpreted as a representation of "ritual bodily humiliation" that subjects the social body to the dominance of the imperial image[4].

[1] Ray L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 48.

[2]Christopher H. Hallett, *The Roman Nude: Heroic Portrait Statuary 200 BC–AD 300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005),123.

[3]The normal width between the feet is likely to be within the shoulder width range (~38–40 cm), so a 50 cm increase represents an increase of approximately 25–30%. See: Chien-Sing Pan et al., "Effects of Foot Placement on Postural Stability of Construction Workers on Stilts," *Applied Ergonomics* 40, no. 4 (July 2009):781–9

[4] Carlin Barton, Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 145-147.

(Fig. 13)

3. **A Model of Moral Balance: Comparing the Narcissism of Nero and Caligula with the Statues of Marcus Aurelius**

Emperor Marcus Aurelius ruled from 161 to 180 AD, during a period plagued by successive challenges, from wars on the northern borders to internal epidemics. Nevertheless, Aurelius maintained his image as the "philosopher emperor," and his public persona was characterized by moral balance and contemplative depth. He wrote his Meditations during military campaigns, believing that true victory lay in integrity and self-control, not just in winning battles[1]. It can be argued that the statues of Marcus Aurelius reflect the Stoic philosophy[2] of balance, wisdom, and moral discipline[3].

[1].Dio Cassius, Roman History, 72.36, translated by Earnest Cary (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927). Marcus Aurelius, Τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν, 6.30; Wallace-Hadrill, *Roman Emperor*, 78–79.

[2] Stoicism is a philosophical school founded in Athens in the early third century BC by Zeno of Citium. It is based on the principle that virtue (arete) lies in living following reason and harmony with nature. The Stoics espoused self-discipline, emotional control, and viewed pain and pleasure as non-essential to the virtuous life. They believed that the rational person remains resilient in the face of life's vicissitudes. The works of Marcus Aurelius, particularly the Meditations, are prime examples of the application of this philosophy to government and politics. See:A.A. Long, *Stoic Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 114–138; Brad Inwood, *Stoicism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

The philosopher Marcus Aurelius himself explains in his book Meditations that a wise ruler is aware of the limits of power and acts with moral responsibility. Marcus Aurelius, 2002, 34.

[3] Stoic philosophy formed the ethical foundation for Marcus Aurelius's leadership. Robertson notes that Aurelius embraced Stoic principles, such as self-control, justice, and prudence, as essential tools in facing the challenges of governance. For example, Aurelius used self-reflection to strengthen his will and guide his decisions in line with virtue and reason. Robertson highlights that this approach was not merely a theoretical philosophy, but a practical practice that helped the emperor maintain psychological balance and make just decisions in times of crisis. Marcus used reflection and philosophical thinking to discipline himself and achieve wise leadership. For more details, see: Donald Robertson, *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019), 48–55.

When his statues are compared to those of Nero and Caligula in terms of material, posture, artistic direction, and sculptural techniques, a clear contrast emerges between what might be called the "imperial narcissism" of Nero and Caligula, and the "contemplative virtue" of Aurelius. This contrast reflects not only a difference in artistic style, but also a difference in the psychological and symbolic structure that each ruler sought to instill in the collective imagination. As Jane Fejfer explains, Roman portraiture is inseparable from the political system; it always reflects the emperor's position in public discourse and the symbolic tools of dominance[1].

Meanwhile, statues of Nero and Caligula display distinctly narcissistic features: the direct, penetrating gaze, the emotionless face, the raised chin in a gesture of superiority, and the rigid, open stance—all elements used to establish a superior, superhuman aura. Zanker describes this artistic language as "a coercive mechanism for creating superiority through appearance[2]; statues of Marcus Aurelius—such as his famous equestrian statue (Fig. 15[3])—convey a different discourse, one focused on humility and contemplation, addressing the viewer in a philosophical, non-authoritarian language. His body stands in a balanced position, his right hand raised in a calm, non-threatening gesture, and his face bears a calm expression that is far from tense or arrogant[4], reflecting what Wallace-Hadrill described as "the authority of the philosopher[5]" His statues are shown with a thick beard, weary features, and a low gaze, in contrast to the previous idealistic and divine gaze. This gaze is accompanied by a relaxed position of the shoulders, reflecting the balance of the self with the social mask in a consistent manner[6]. Bottom of Form: His slightly raised forehead, and his relaxed lips create a contemplative expression that symbolizes wisdom and reflection, not dominance. (Fig. 14[7]) This radical disparity in physical and artistic expression not only represents artistic diversity but also profoundly translates the difference in political and psychological character between the balanced ruler and the narcissistic ruler[8].

[1] Fejfer, *Roman Portraits*, 223–225.

[2] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 21–24.

[3] The monument dates back to around 175–176 AD, as a tribute to his victory over the Sarmatians. It is on display in the Musei Capitolini in Rome. It was moved to the museum in 1981 for preservation. It is made of bronze, previously covered with gilding. Its total height is over 4.2 meters. Emperor Marcus Aurelius AD121–180 - a Profound and Peaceful Leader

[4] Nicholas Hume, *Roman Imperial Art and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113.

[5] Wallace-Hadrill, *Roman Emperor*, 83–85; Craig Calhoun, *Philosophy and Power in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 48.

[6] Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*. 34.

[7] Zanker, Art of Persuasion, 88.

[8] Here, Aurelius reflects an aspect of Michel Foucault's theory of power on the relationship between art and power, which states that art and control are not separate but intertwined in the "cognitive (artistic) formation of domination." (Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 98) Nicholas Hume explains in his analysis of Roman art that the statues of Aurelius embody this philosophical position, as the statues are not only a symbol of power but also a reminder of the moral duty of the ruler. (Hume, *Roman Imperial Art*, 113).

- **Historians' Support:**

Suetonius and others do not exaggerate in their description of Marcus Aurelius's personality; rather, their references are in harmony with the artistic images. Cassius Dio notes that: "he despised adornment and refused the golden statues offered to him[1]."

Paul Zanker, in his study of the art of the Roman emperors, asserts, "Marcus Aurelius chose to present himself not as a god or a savior, but as a teacher and a sage[2]."

Political Art and the Formation of Collective Identity

Statues of Marcus Aurelius display a subtle artistic blend known as "idealized realism," a technique that balances the depiction of realistic features—such as wrinkles and signs of aging—with idealized form, highlighting qualities of wisdom and contemplation without exaggeration or dramatization. As Jane Pfeiffer explains, this approach represented a sculptural direction in the statues of Marcus, who was intended to appear human and balanced, neither divine nor authoritarian[3].

In one statue (Fig. 14), a subtle use of chiaroscuro is evident in the sculpture to highlight the facial features and deepen the psychological perception of the character. The soft, carefully carved shadows convey feelings of sober sadness or introspection, without resorting to excessive dramatic expressions. Wrinkles appear natural and harmonious, suggesting experience and maturity, while the eyes appear lively and visually connected to the viewer, enhancing the philosophical, contemplative character of the statues of Marcus Aurelius.

In contrast, the statues of Caligula embody a different, narcissistic approach. They are often depicted with a smooth, wrinkle-free face, with sharp, rigid gazes that convey an authoritarian stance that does not engage with the viewer but rather subjugates them. Paul Zanker believes that this severity in features and gaze aims to create a symbolic distance between the ruler and the ruled and to consolidate an image of superiority[4].

In the famous equestrian statue of Marcus (Fig. 15), the emperor does not hold a sword but extends his right hand in a peaceful salute, indicating dialogue and adlocution[5] (*adlocutio*), despite being a military commander in wartime circumstances. This statue embodies an artistic model of authority based on rationality and self-discipline rather than violence or military display. In the famous pose, the emperor avoids carrying a weapon or shield, contenting himself with an open gesture with his right hand, expressing a "soft authority" based on discourse and wisdom rather than coercion. His body is well-proportioned yet devoid of aggression, thus expressing a

[1] Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 71.33.1.

[2] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 215.

[3] Fejfer, *Roman Portraits*, 305–308

[4] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 87–90.

[5] In Roman art, the *adlocutio* refers to a formal oratorical gesture performed by an emperor or commander, often with an outstretched arm and the palm facing forward. It symbolizes addressing soldiers or the people and embodies authority, calm, and rational control. This gesture appears on many official Roman statues, most notably the *Primaporta* of Augustus and the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius (see: Kleiner, *History of Roman Art*, 244–245.)

desire for calm influence rather than a will to dominate, in keeping with the ethical principles of Stoic philosophy. His features bear a calm gaze directed toward the people, while his poised body, refraining from any violent action, reflects an artistic expression of a sober mind. The head is slightly lowered, and the eyes appear to be fixed forward in an expression of humility, while the emperor's general posture is relaxed. The statue achieves an aesthetic balance between the body and the surrounding space, without exaggerating its size or excessive self-centeredness. Together, these features embody what can be called the "artistic manifestation of Stoic leadership," where Stoic philosophy is represented through manifestations of humility, self-discipline, and wisdom.

Compared to the eyebrows of Nero and Caligula, the eyebrows of Marcus Aurelius in his statues do not show signs of tension or arrogance. Rather, they appear relaxed and natural, reflecting an inner balance and psychological serenity. This indicates a balanced personality far removed from pathological narcissism, with a natural self-respect[1]. (Fig. 14[2])

(Fig. 14)

[1] Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions*, 120

[2] Marcus Aurelius in the Louvre, including three prominent models in the Louvre collection (Ma1166 / MR561 / N1416), one of which is a restored complete head: Daniel Roger, *Roman Art from the Louvre* (New York: American Federation of Arts in association with the Louvre Museum, 2007), 58–59, cat. no. 7.

https://ancientrome.ru/art/img/4/4380.jpg

(Fig. 15)

Marcus Aurelius's features appear on coins: calm, his eyes reflecting contemplation, not dominance, and a calm expression devoid of physical arrogance. The reverse side of the coin often depicts images symbolizing justice, peace, or philosophy[1]. Reflecting the personality of an emperor closer to the philosopher rather than the inflated self (Fig. 16[2]).

(Fig. 16)

[1] RIC III, Aurelius, 289–291; RIC – Roman Imperial Coinage

[2] RIC III, Aurelius, 1010 NumisBids: Noonans Auction 326, Lot 2594: Ancient Roman Coins from Various Properties Marcus Aurelius...

The psychological balance between the mask and the real self in Marcus Aurelius was not limited to his features and body language, but extended to his clothing, which reflected a more modest fashion compared to his predecessors. Statues depict him wearing a Roman toga, with few ostentatious decorations or accessories[1]. In some statues, he wears a simple military robe (paludamentum[2]), reflecting military discipline and wisdom rather than ostentatious power. Even in his everyday attire, he reflects his adherence to Stoic philosophy[3]. Marcus Aurelius's fashions demonstrate authority based on wisdom and a sense of responsibility[4]. It also reflects psychological balance and a balanced appearance consistent with his philosophy[5].

Historical Reading of Physical Behavior

Some teachings on modesty are mentioned in Aurelius's memoirs (to himself[6]), where he states:

"The body should be upright but not stiff."

"Avoid gestures that draw unnecessary attention."

Counter-indications of narcissism in Marcus Aurelius

- Clothing: Aurelius adopted the simple attire of philosophers[7].
- Physical Interaction: Cassius Dio described him as "approaching citizens more like a father than a god[8]."
- Statues: 80% of them depict him in natural poses (walking, sitting writing, equestrian).
- Head Tilt: 5°, within the normal Roman norm[9].
- Hand Position: The gesture of address (*adlocution*), without exaggeration, neither threatening nor ostentatious.

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[1] Hume, *Roman Imperial Art*, 116.

[2] The *paludamentum* was a Roman military cloak worn by military leaders, such as generals and high-ranking officers, and sometimes by the emperor himself. It was fastened at the shoulder by a clasp known as a fibula and was often worn over the right shoulder to leave the right arm free to move. It was usually made of luxurious fabric, often purple or scarlet, distinguishing its wearer from ordinary soldiers who wore the sagum. Roman commanders wore it when leaving the city after being granted military authority (*imperium*), and removed it upon their return to their status as ordinary citizens.

William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875), 853-54.

[3] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 37.

[4] Salvesen, *Body Cues to Narcissism*, 70.

[5] Jung, *Archetypes*, 38.

[6] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 1.7.

[7] Anthony Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2020), 56.

[8] Dio Cassius 72.36.2

[9] G. Zimmer, *Gesture and Power: Postural Rhetoric in Roman Imperial Statuary* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 56.

Historically and archaeologically documented narcissistic deviations and religious violations:

(1) Physical Violations

(I) Caligula:

Suetonius reports that Caligula sat on a statue of Jupiter and forced the priests to approach him within only 0.5 meters. This reflects Caligula's narcissistic imitation of the god, as he considered himself a "living Jupiter[1]." Excavations at the Palatine in 2016 revealed that Caligula's distance reached 0.7 meters[2].

(II) Nero:

In his lost biography, cited by Dio Cassius, Nero ordered statues of himself to be carved within the sanctuary of temples, violating the rule of distance[3].

(III) Marcus Aurelius:

Aurelius did not violate physical distance[4]: he maintained 1.5 meters in official scenes in temples, as reported in archaeological and literary sources. His statues were often erected in public places (such as his equestrian statue on the Capitoline).

(2) Greeting Positions

The Roman Standard for Greeting According to Roman Tradition:

The customary greeting (*adlocutio*) of the aristocracy was to raise the right hand at a ~45° angle, as seen on first-century BC[5] coins and as seen in the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius.

The Narcissistic Perversions of Caligula and Nero:

(I) Caligula:

According to Seneca, Caligula imposed the kissing of the feet instead of the military salute[6]. This is interpreted in psychology as a form of forcing others or the general public into positions of physical humiliation.

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[1] Suet. *Caligula* 22.3.

[2] Department of Archaeology, Sapienza University of Rome, *Roman Sacred Spaces: Boundaries and Rituals* (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2016), 45, fig. 3.2.

[3] Dio Cassius, 61.20.1-2.

[4] The Roman standard for religious foundations: According to the inscriptions of the Temple of Jupiter Capitoline (CIL VI.2065), the minimum distance between the public and the statues of the gods was 1.5 meters, indicating the deity's sanctity. Excavations at the Palatine (2016) discovered ground markings indicating restricted areas in front of the emperor's statues, showing that the distance at Augustus was 1.8 m. Archaeological Team of the Palatine Hill, *Interim Report: Sacred Boundaries in the Domus Augustana*, (Rome: Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma, 2015), 22-25, archeoroma.beniculturali.it. Department of Archaeology, Sapienza University of Rome, Roman Sacred Spaces: Boundaries and Rituals, (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2016), 45, fig. 3.2.

Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Vol. VI: Inscriptiones Urbis Romae Latinae, Edited by Th. Mommsen et al. Berlin: Reimer, 1876-1902. No. 2065. "No one is allowed to approach the statue of Jupiter within 8 feet ≈, 1.5 meters.

[5] Hölscher, *Language of Images*, 78-82; Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 45-50; Zanker focuses on the symbolism of gestures in the early imperial period.

[6] Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* 47.8.

(II) Nero:

According to the manuscript (The Acts of Nero) (preserved in the Vatican, Codex Vat. Gr. 1627), Nero was described as demanding that people kneel and touch the ground with their foreheads when addressing him[1].

Second: The Body as a Political-Show-Off Tool

According to Tacitus's Annals [2] and Suetonius's Lives of the Twelve Caesars[3], Caligula and Nero were characterized by show-off physical movements (such as claiming divinity or dancing in times of crisis). Nero introduced dance positions into official rituals (Tacitus described them as "excessively Greek[4]"). Caligula replaced the raised hand with the hand on the hip, a Hellenistic[5], non-Roman position. The extended foot: a sign of dominance[6], similar to the statues of the pharaohs[7]. While Marcus Aurelius was characterized by a more reserved demeanor. These contrasts reflect differences in the roles of the public. Emperors between Political Impersonation and Realism

C. Proportion of Artistic Space

In the Pompeii frescoes, Caligula's figure occupies ~65% of the painting's space, compared to ~25% in paintings of contemporary emperors such as Claudius[8], with exaggerated details (such as bulging eyes and hardened features) highlighted. He is depicted as ~30-40% larger than the surrounding figures[9].

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[1] Vat.gr.1627 | DigiVatLib Shadi Bartsch, "The Politics of Performance in Nero's Rome," *Classical Philology* 91, no. 4 (October 1996): 338.

[2] Tac., *Annals*, 15.37.

[3] Suet. Caligula, 50-55.

[4] Tac., *Annales* 14.15.

[5] Marco Filio, *The Emperor's Body: Power and Ritual in Imperial Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 137, fig. 4.5. William E. Metcalf, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), Tables 3.1-3.2

[6] John Baines, "The Pharaoh's Foot: Symbolism in Ancient Egyptian Art," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 96 (2010): 45-60.

[7] Zanker shows how Roman emperors borrowed symbols from Eastern art (Egypt, Greece) to assert their legitimacy, including body postures that included the extended leg position—adopted from Pharaonic art and used in imperial statues to assert dominance. Zanker, *Art of Persuasion*, 90-95.

[8] Anthony A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 120; Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002),180-85. Barrett explains how Caligula imposed his image in public art (such as frescoes and statues) with divine features (similar to Jupiter), with visual comparisons that highlight the differences between him and Augustus or Tiberius. Caligula reportedly requested to be depicted larger than life in official sculpture. Gradel analyzes how Caligula used art to establish the cult of the emperor, with specific examples from Pompeii, where his portraits appear dominant compared to previous emperors.

[9] Eric R. Varner, "Caligula's Portraits: The Power of Imagery," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 21 (2008): 275-290.

Images in Nero's coins occupy ~78-80% of the piece (Roman standard: ~50%), compared to Vespasian's (~50% or less[1]).

The extracted contextual indicators demonstrate that:

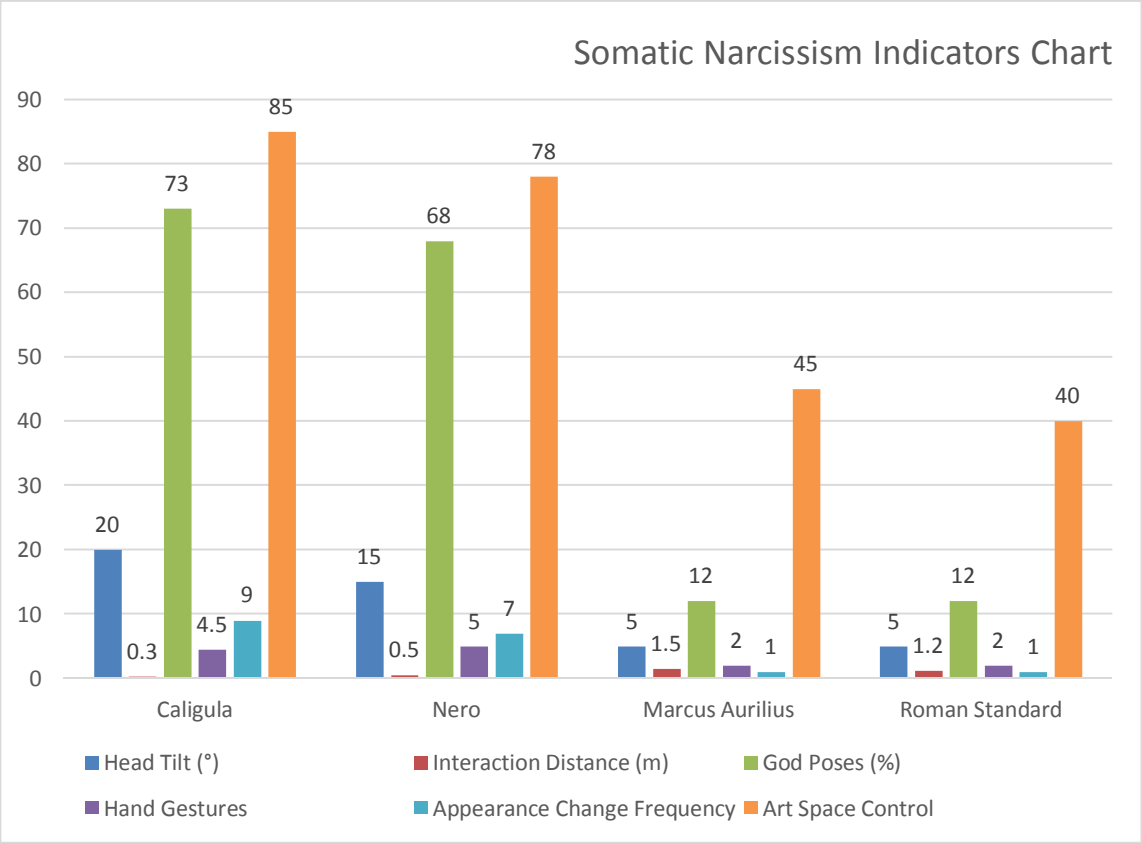
- Imperial narcissism was not merely a personal behavior but a deliberate political strategy to manipulate bodily signs and build absolute prestige.
- Caligula and Nero used the body not only as an artistic medium but also as a tool for domination, while Marcus Aurelius adhered to the classical balance of the imperial body.
- The study results indicate a clear narcissistic progression among the three emperors, ranked as follows: Caligula had the highest levels of narcissism, followed by Nero, and then Marcus Aurelius, who represented the opposite model.

In terms of the finer details:

- Nero excelled in "hand gestures," as a result of his theatrical background, as evident in his physical presence.
- Caligula scored highest in "godlike poses," indicating his clear pursuit of deification.
- Marcus Aurelius represented an ideal example of a non-narcissistic imperial body, with all his physical indicators falling at or below the Roman average.

[1] Sutherland notes that Nero increased the size of his image on coins, especially after 64 AD, as part of a policy of "personality cult", while Zanker analyzes how Nero used art and coins to amplify his image, with further comparisons. See:

C. H. V. Sutherland, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 1, *From 31 BC to AD 69*, rev. ed. (London: Spink & Son, 1984), 160-165; Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 120-125.



Comparative table of somatic narcissism indicators:

Index	Caligula (37-41 AD)	Nero (54-68 AD)	Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD)	Roman Standard
Head Tilt (°)	20°	15°	5°	5°-8°
Interaction Distance (m)	0.3m	0.5m	1.5m	1.2m
God Poses (%)	73-75%	68-70%	12%	12%
Hand Gestures (scale 1-5)	4.5	5.0	2.0	2.0
Appearance Change Frequency	≤9 times/year	≤7 times/year	1 times/year	1-2 times/year
Art Space Control	85%	78-80%	45%	40-50%

Analysis of statues of emperors and their mention in literary sources

Conclusion:

The importance of Roman art lies in its role as a mirror for the imperial self, employing the body as a dual tool for political and psychological communication. Analysis has shown that Nero and Caligula deliberately used their bodies to construct a superior, narcissistic image, while Marcus Aurelius presented a contrasting model characterized by detachment from narcissism through bodily gestures characterized by humility and philosophical contemplation.

Both Nero and Caligula represent a unique case of imperial narcissism, clearly reflected in their statues and portraits, where each resorted to carefully designed bodily gestures to enhance the image of a divine or supernatural ruler. This bodily performance was based on well-known symbols in somatic science, such as direct stares, raised chins, and dominating postures—deliberate behaviors intended to embody grandeur and superiority while concealing underlying psychological fragility. The comparison of the statues' archaeological aspects, body postures, artistic orientation, and sculptural techniques revealed a clear contrast between the manifestations of imperial narcissism, on the one hand, and the moral balance and philosophical contemplation that characterized Marcus Aurelius, on the other. The analysis was not limited to a purely artistic reading; rather, it provided an accurate mirror of the psychological and political structure that each emperor sought to visually establish through his body.

The study concludes that:

- Despite the time difference between them, the bodily signals associated with narcissism appeared similarly between Nero and Caligula.
- The artistic embodiment was not neutral; rather, it actively contributed to reinforcing the narcissistic image of the emperor as a political tool.
- Contemporary body language analysis models can be effectively applied to historical figures to understand the psychological and political motivations behind the formation of the imperial image.

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