

KELLY, JAMES & CHRISTIE SHINN

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ABSTRACT

An interview with the author James Kelly and the illustrator Christie Shinn, who created the first volume of the graphic novel *Caligula Imperatore Insanum* in 2016.



1. Introduction

CALIGULA Imperatore Insanum is the title of a graphic novel, whose first volume was published in February 2016. The 64 pages of the volume, which has appeared for CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, are the result of the cooperation between author James Kelly and illustrator Christie Shinn. The former has clearly a strong fascination for Classical Antiquity, as he also has established an imprint (or, a “comic company”) called Olympian Comics. Both have agreed to be interviewed by *thersites* and to talk about their work.

Caligula is definitely not an uncommon presence in Classical Reception – in all media.¹ Starting from his appearance in Robert Graves’ *I, Claudius* (and its famous BBC adaptation, in which John Hurt appeared as Caligula), his portrait as a mad, manic, violent emperor, has struck the imagination of many an artist, director, writer. Even if Caligula is not historically related to any particular event of persecution of the Christians, he could become a mad persecutor in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953) – thus reinforcing century his association in the 20th to Nero as one half of the pair of ‘worst’ emperors – a view that was already common in Antiquity.²

While historians have meanwhile revisited Caligula extensively and made clear that he was not as the sources and this tradition want us to believe,³ reception products continue insisting on Caligula’s craziness and evil deeds; yet, they have often caused a stronger distress and a higher level of uncanniness than Nero’s. The main reason for this is the widespread idea, already present in Antiquity, that the emperor had not always ‘been thus’. Particularly strong is the theory of a direct connection between Caligula’s alleged decline and autocratic power, the idea that a young boy, endowed

¹ See Lindner (2013).

² E.g. Plin., *HN* 7.45; 36.111; Paus. 9.27.3-4; Dio 61.5.1; Eutr. 7.14.1. See Carlà-Uhink (forthcoming).

³ See in particular Winterling (2011).

too soon with an excessive power, lost control over himself and any idea of justice, misery, and even reality.

Caligula can thus not only figure as a horribly evil monster, even endowed with supernatural powers (as in the graphic novels *Caligula*, 2011-2012, and *Caligula: Heart of Rome*, 2012-2013, by David Lapham and German Nobile), but he can also appear as the symbol of the corruption which is always implicit in power (most famously, this was the original idea of Gore Vidal's script for the movie *Caligula*, 1979, as repeated by Vidal himself in Vezzoli's *Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's Caligula*, 2005).

Caligula is thus an emperor with a strong tradition in reception and in popular culture: his name alone is evocative for most people in the Western world; and generally the thoughts that are evoked are not positive. At the same time, he has multiple and ambiguous connotations, which allows for his continued presence and 'functionalization' in discourses about power, responsibility, autocracy, folly, violence – in short, about human nature.

thersites: The first question is, I fear, somewhat banal, but unavoidable: why Caligula? Or, better: who had the first idea, when and how?

James Kelly: But isn't the most obvious question also the one most worth asking? Caligula is such an infamous figure of history that everyone seems to know simply as being insane and depraved. I was under that belief too, with my first introduction being the infamous film starring Malcolm McDowell. Later I saw (and later read) *I, Claudius* and that portrayed Caligula as literally insane where he genuinely believed he was a god. So, obviously I thought as most people did that this was all there was to the story. But something about Caligula seemed to always linger in the back of my mind as there might be something more to him. Robert Graves had similar thoughts about Claudius before writing his magnificent two books.

Then the History Channel had this documentary, *Caligula: 1400 Days of Terror* and that was one of the first presentations I had ever seen of Caligula not as literally insane but instead as a cruel and sadistic autocrat. I began to think about the facts of Caligula's life and found an incredible human and even tragic story buried underneath the scandal and intrigue. I wanted to tell the story not of the mad-Emperor Caligula, but the story of a little boy, who from the age of 8 watched his father, mother and his two brothers be

killed by the intrigue of the imperial family. Then that little boy had to live with his family's murderer for 5 years before at the age of 25 gaining supremacy over one of the largest empires in human history. What sort of psychological damage would such an adolescence bring to a human being who then had power over life and death? How could Caligula possibly be able to trust anyone when he witnessed his own brother betray his family? This is what drew me to Rome's infamous Emperor.

thr: At what point did this first idea develop into a more substantial project? Was there any "triggering" factor?

JK: So, in relation to the first idea what got me really worked up to tell this story after first seeing the History Channel documentary was this one quote by a person that I have not found since was, "Caligula had to endure traumas that no adult would be expected to endure as a child." That really got my brain buzzing with ideas and saw this whole new angle to tell the story of Caligula. So immediately I set off to tell this story. I first attempted to write this as a play, but it was too long, and the cast was far too big for it to be feasible. Then I tried to work on the story as a screenplay, and that was more satisfactory, but then I stopped as I recognized that the film would likely never be made. So, then I turned to tell this story as a graphic novel. I had already begun working on other projects in the comics medium, and I felt completely comfortable taking this story as a graphic novel.

thr: Did you know each other before working on this project? How did this cooperation begin?

JK: No, we did not. I met Christie through an online ad for artists looking to work on this project.

Christie Shinn: I had put out an ad for my services online. He contacted me and we just started chatting about Roman history and that was it.

thr: Before working on this project, what was the "connection" both of you had to Classical Antiquity? Did you work on any other projects dealing with the Graeco-Roman world? Were you always interested in the ancient Greeks and Romans?

JK: I have always been fascinated by Classical Antiquity. My first taste of Graeco-Roman mythology was the Disney film, *Hercules* (John Musker/Ron Clements, 1997). That just inspired interest into this great mythology and learning slowly but surely how vastly different the real myths were to the way they were sanitized for a Disney film. I came to greatly appreciate the myths. Then when it came to the history that was just as exciting and interesting. I always knew that I wanted to understand and learn more about these figures that fundamentally changed the world – who was this Julius Caesar? Being an English major in college, I loved reading *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Antiquity has always fascinated me both in terms of Graeco-Roman culture and history.

CS: As many other children in the US, we've all been exposed to the Greco-Roman mythology and history in some form or another. In some ways, architecturally and politically, we do try to emulate its shadow in some form or another. I really loved how the gods contrasted so much to the Biblical God in some other ways as well. It sort of showed the mindset of the civilization into itself. It helped me to “get into their heads” per se.

thr: We need now to be the bad, punctilious Classicists: how did the title of your graphic novel come into being? It is quite awkward, if we consider the Latin... Caligula might be a nominative, or the English name, *imperatore* is an ablative, or Italian, and *insanum* an accusative. Was it made this disjointed on purpose?

JK: *Mea culpa*. I wanted to translate *The Mad Emperor Caligula* into Latin and that was the translation I got from some website. It sounded good and real, but I acknowledge it's gibberish. It is somewhat a play on Caligula Imperatore Romano. I do know and frequently reference in the graphic novel that Caligula is the nickname “Little Boot(s)” untranslated. But we chose to call him “Caligula” in the title, and I wanted to convey something slightly more elegant than “The Mad Emperor Caligula”.

thr: Can we move into the sector which interests scholars of Classical Receptions the most? Where did you get your information on Caligula from? Did you read directly the ancient sources? And which ones?

JK: I have consulted the classics. With Caligula we really have two main sources, Suetonius *Twelve Caesars* and Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, as I'm sure most of your readers know. There is also the brief but heavily detailed accounts of two incidents from Josephus' *Jewish Antiquity* that cover Caligula's death, and Philo detailing a first-hand experience with Caligula. I also did use some of Tacitus' *Annals* as the first greater section of the story deals with most of Tiberius' reign and the manipulations and machinations of Sejanus. This will appear in volume two.

thr: And what about secondary, scholarly literature? Did you engage with that too?

JK: I did, Aloys Winterling's *Caligula* was probably one of my main sources in helping me tell the story of Caligula.⁴ I also consulted Anthony A. Barrett's *Caligula: The Abuse of Power*,⁵ which was helpful for providing more familiarity with certain facts about Caligula's life, but it was a text I mostly disagreed with as Barrett unintentionally presents Caligula as far more justified for his abuses of power, even rational. My graphic novel owes everything to the new historicism and revisionists, as the only primary source is Philo, with Suetonius writing over a century after the events and Dio writing even further after the events. Both Roman authors were heavily biased and portrayed Caligula as figuratively insane. The Jewish authors believed Caligula was literally insane because of his godhood proclamations which is truly mad for practicing monotheists.

The secondary scholars were necessary as they recognized moments where the authors removed the context of some of Caligula's actions or presented certain insults at face-value. The most obvious example being Caligula declaring his horse Incitatus a senator. The senators likely understood it was an insult as it demonstrated what Caligula thought of the Senate. But the later historians, who were from the senatorial class, got their vengeance by simply saying that he wanted to make Incitatus a senator. Suggesting that Caligula somehow sincerely believed a horse would make a good senator, which naturally implies madness.

⁴ Winterling (2011).

⁵ Barrett (2015).

thr: Christie: did you engage in iconographic research for drawing “ancient Romans”? What were your sources of inspiration to create an immersive Roman setting?

CS: I remember reading a lot of literature regarding Antony and Cleopatra, and the ensuing reign of Augustus. That may not seem contemporary to Caligula’s time, but it provided a backdrop to what set the stage when he was alive. Also, it helped watching lots of videos of venomous snakes and their behaviours – which got me the idea for the cover and the inner graphic of the book. I was amazed at how these highly poisonous organisms bite and snap at each other peevishly, but they can also rear/isolate their young to procreate their bloodline to a degree of successful population. Also, being an absolute nerd in the subject of Greco-Roman history and its myths helps too. I used to watch the British show “Supersizers” and they would go in each era and explore the food, dress, and style of living, amongst other shows. I did go to Italy and Greece this past year and you get to see in a much fuller context to an extent to where their culture and personalities are.

thr: Did you engage with other modern products representing Caligula, both for the content and for the visual aspects? Which ones impressed you most?

CS: It was kind of hard to. I suppose it’s a rite of passage to watch Penthouse’s *Caligula*, but we both really wanted to stay away from that movie and make it our own. We referred to *I, Claudius* a lot, or at least I did, because it provided a bit more of a well-rounded idea of Rome around that time, rather than just porn. I’m not discounting Helen Mirren’s, Malcolm McDowell’s, or any of the cast’s performances, but it’s more known for the erotic aspect than really anything else. We wanted that, but we also wanted to give a whole, epic, bloody story with some relatable undertones and a certain logic of why he did what he did. We wanted to show epic decadence, but to utter debauchery and disillusionment. We wanted to see the logic of how a person could become degraded and utterly embittered with a true hatred of life – kind of like *The Walking Dead*.

thr: Did you look at other comics on the subject of or featuring Caligula? Did you know about any beforehand?

JK: Right as I was sending out a want ad for this project, someone pointed me to the comic by Lapham and Nobile,⁶ which I have not read yet. But just looking at it and the description of it, I knew that it represented everything I wanted to avoid in my own graphic novel.

CS: I didn't. I have read Roman-era comics, but not much in terms of Caligula specifically, but I had avoided those as well. I preferred reading about the man and watching documentaries of him.

thr: Chronologically and as genre, the nearest "other Caligula" is indeed the one created by Lapham and Nobile. Can you tell us what you think of those graphic novels and what are the main differences between "their" and "your" Caligula?

JK: So to follow-up on my previous response I do not want to suggest that our interpretation of Caligula is "right" while Lapham and Noble's is "wrong". They tell a supernatural horror story where Caligula is possessed by a demon which later possesses Nero. That is a fine story to tell in the arts. Juvenal accused Caligula's wife Caesonia of giving him a love potion that drove him insane.

But I wanted to tell a more realistic story and one that was driven by emotional truth. This is more of a character study into what it was like to be a member of the Imperial family in which every day you suspected might be your last. There are a few characters having visions of the future, but beyond that there will be no appearances of the gods or demons in our story. Also, Nero will only appear as an infant, and in an epilogue sequence.

CS: We wanted to give a well-rounded account rather than some of the propaganda that was bandied about. We couldn't really completely separate fact from fiction as hundreds of years had passed, but we merely pieced together events and compared if they could be probable or not.

thr: Why do you think that Caligula might be "interesting" or "important" today? What is the reason of his being still "actual"?

⁶ David Lapham & German Nobile, *Caligula*, 2 vols, Rantoul (IL) 2011.

JK: First and foremost, and this is why I was drawn to telling his story, is that Caligula embodies just how awful and terrible hereditary monarchy is for everyone. For Caligula, because of the (sometimes justified) paranoia of Tiberius, he would see his mother, father and two brothers die. It also is both shocking and fascinating to learn that when power is involved, you cannot trust your own family. Even before Caligula became Emperor, he witnessed his brother Drusus lie and betray his family to gain Tiberius' favour. When Caligula came into power, his two sisters would plot against him. Long before the infamous Agrippina the Younger was poisoning Claudius and trying to control Nero, she was plotting to have Caligula, her own brother, assassinated.

For the people of Rome, Caligula's reign was a mixture of excess circuses, neglect and mismanagement as he inherited an Empire at peace and rich and left it poor and at war. Needless to say, for the elite, he was a horrific nightmare for his autocratic tendencies and sadistic humour.

Caligula is eternally relevant because he is a great example of "nature vs. nurture" as anyone who steps back to understand the horrible upbringing of Caligula can understand why he became what he was known as. We often want to know where the awful human beings of history come from, and Caligula provides the world with a perfect example of a terrible upbringing mixed with being given absolute power.

I think looking more in a broad perspective, the most important lesson to draw from Caligula is that we must learn to have checks and balances to power. Augustus established a military autocracy during his reign that was only accountable to the whims of the military. Caligula, unlike Augustus and Tiberius, was not interested in concealing his actual power and instead flaunted it. The Senate's impotence and irrelevance was exposed by Caligula, and the Senate's historians quickly tried to dismiss this as Caligula being a power obsessed madman.

Lastly, I believe also that Caligula represents the danger of placing all our hopes on a single person. Everyone had venerated Caligula's father Germanicus as Rome's Alexander the Great. They believed that Caligula would redeem and save Rome. We cannot hope to have all of our problems be solved by one man, and we should not ignore the faults of the people we choose to follow. We need to recognize leaders for who they are and not give them everything to control our lives.

CS: To me, Caligula is tragic. It doesn't detract from the fact that he was a truly horrible person, but you get to see the "logic" of how he had been truly threatened and persecuted that resulted in his mania and paranoia in later years. It also shows how much introspection helps with the self. I think Caligula was so traumatized emotionally, he was daring for the gods or the Fates to kill him because he'd already escaped so many dangerous situations before. Also, his rages were as a result of trauma, but it was interesting and sad that his very own family caused those to such a great extent – yet expected him to be a long-lasting ruler. In a way, I do feel he was suicidal, because he was almost daring for death to just kill him. You kind of wonder the combinations of nature vs. nurture could have caused that.

thr: More generally, what do you think Classical Antiquity can still teach us today?

JK: The age-old lesson is that if we do not learn from our mistakes, we are doomed to repeat them. In America there is an understandable fascination/obsession with trying to find parallels between our history and that of Rome. Mike Duncan, of the phenomenal podcast, *The History of Rome*, was constantly asked that question, and finally determined a solid answer with his excellent book, *The Storm Before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic*.

But it is not just the mistakes that we can draw lessons from, it is also from their many accomplishments. The culture and myths of the Graeco-Romans have wisdom that applies to every culture at every time. While technology and societies may change, people do not, and the myths spoke about our human nature. That is something that makes Classical Antiquity as important today as it was then.

CS: I think we can take similarities from our history to now. However, I think to recite if we don't learn from the past is rather trite. It is a good lesson, but only as good of a lesson if we don't let our own hubris and own prejudices cloud the judgement. If we are impartial and look at the bigger picture, that lesson does hold resonance if one is willing to go outside themselves. I have seen both sides politically quote that endlessly, but rarely go outside of their own blinders to see the whole picture or even make that effort.

thr: What are your next projects? Are you planning further work together, and are you planning further work with the Graeco-Roman world?

JK: The Romans are definitely in me, and I have more stories to tell with them. I am still hard at work on Caligula with a new artist, Marcio Loerzer. This is definitely a passion project that I will continue to work on. But after that, my next Roman epic will be *A Year in Hell*, which will detail the Year of the Four Emperors. Beyond that, I have some interest in doing a dark comedy about Didius Julianus, the second of the emperors in the year of five emperors (193 CE). There is so much rich history to explore that interests me. I also have a story set in modern times involving the Graeco-Roman gods that is inspired by the works of Neil Gaiman.

CS: Currently I'm running a Kickstarter on my current webcomic, 'Demon Bitch'. It's a commentary on people that are so self-delusional, yet painfully aware of how inadequate they are deep inside. However, the humor of all that is to show that we all deal with a 'demon bitch' and possibly have that in ourselves. It satirizes the things in society of which we turn the other way, and don't care to look at because we don't want to admit that we have that or we permit that. This goes beyond all the hashtagged niceties that we do in order to make us feel like we're doing something in lieu of actual personal action to resolve our own issues. You can follow the Kickstarter and any other projects that I am involved in on my website at www.HoraToraStudios.com

thr: Thank you both for this conversation.

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Caligula imperatore insanum: an interview

Figures

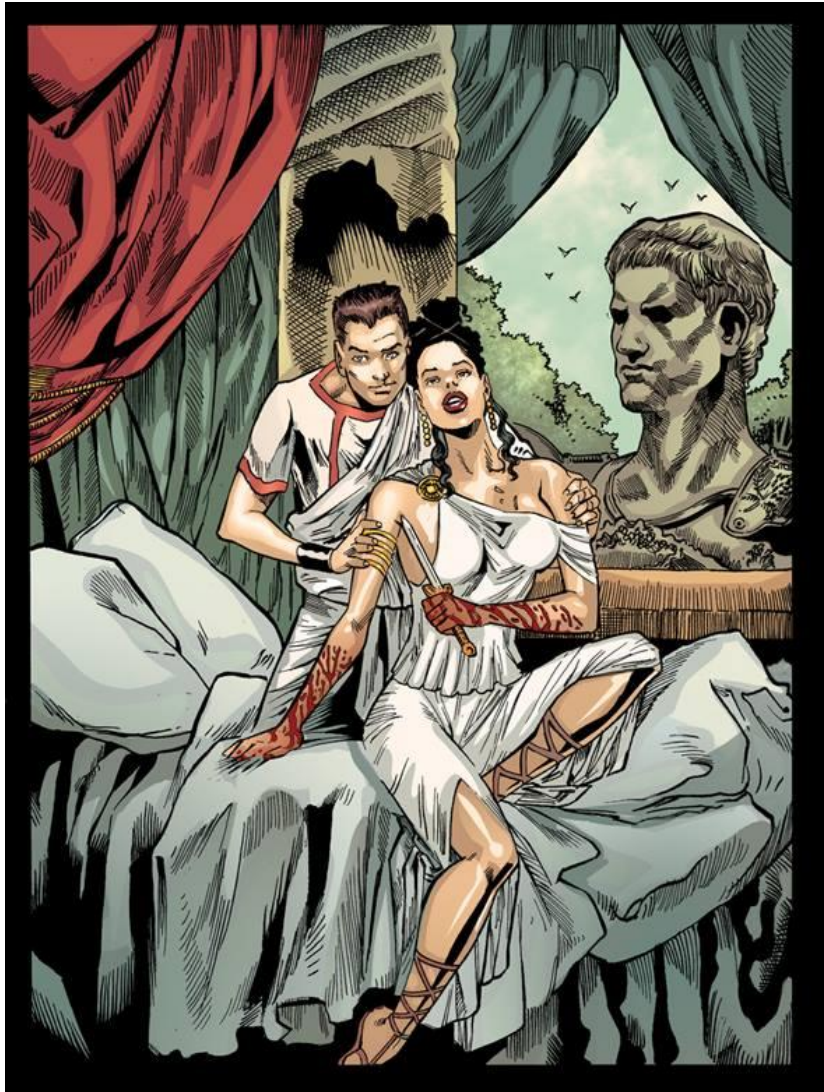


Fig. 1: *Caligula imperatore insanum*, cover art.



Fig. 2: *Caligula imperatore insanum*, p. 25.

Caligula imperatore insanum: an interview

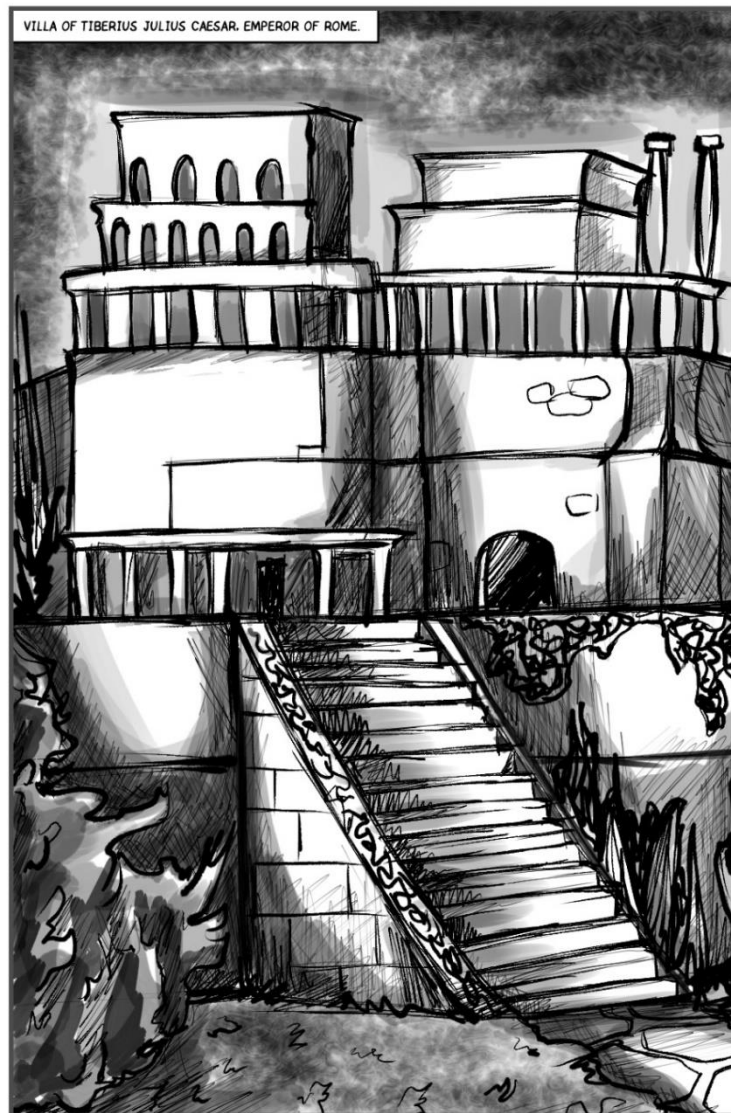


Fig.. 3: *Caligula imperatore insanum*, p. 31.

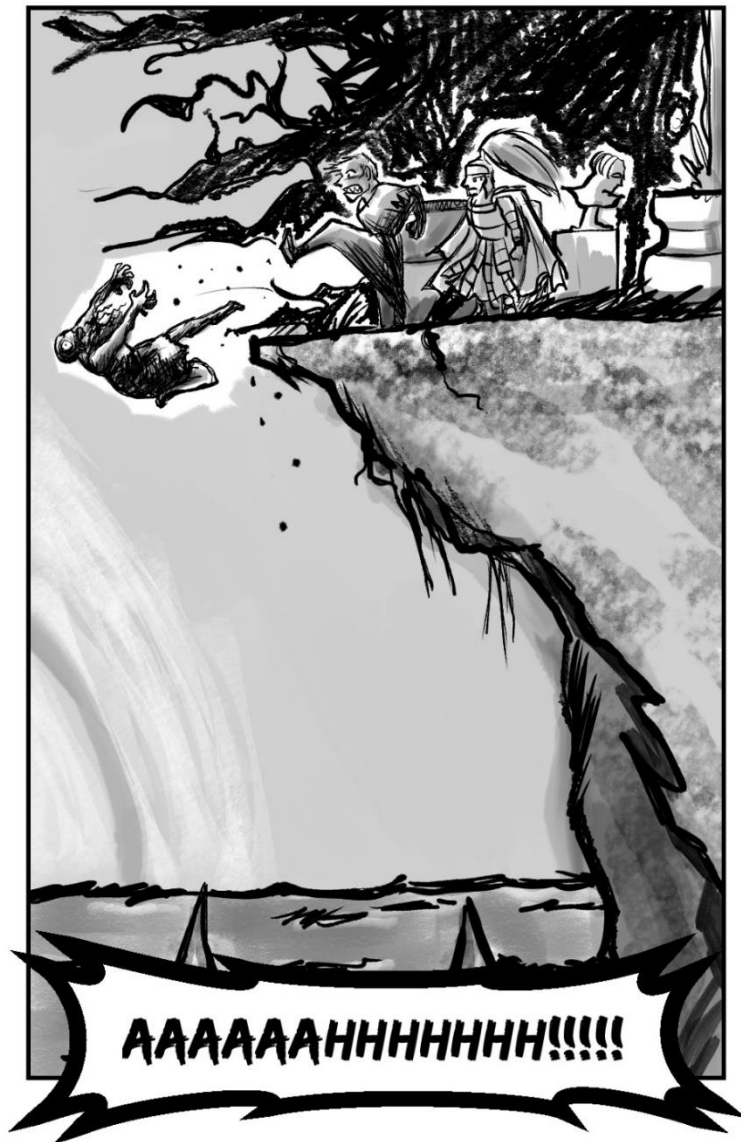


Fig. 4: *Caligula imperatore insanum*, p. 47.