

some word is widely thought to have dropped out, and the adverb is demonstrably part of the orator's typical vocabulary. Ergo, punctuate this part of the sentence with parentheses or dashes as suggested by Vannini, but read <quippe> *cum*.

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CLAUDIUS' HUMILIATION AT SUETONIUS, *DIVVS CLAVDIVS* 8

ABSTRACT

Suetonius says that court jesters put slippers on Claudius' hands while he napped during Caligula's dinner parties so that he would rub his face with them when he awoke. Since touching someone with the sole of a shoe was an insult, the joke is that Claudius insulted himself when he unwittingly rubbed his own face with the slippers.

Keywords: Claudius; Suetonius; insult; sole; slippers; *socci*; *copreae*

According to Suetonius (*Claud.* 8), Claudius suffered indignities at the hands of *copreae* ('court jesters') during Caligula's parties. One of these involved placing slippers on his hands when he fell asleep during dinner so that he would rub his face with them when he awoke: *solebant et manibus stertentis socci induci ut repente expergefactus faciem sibimet confricaret*. While commentators have made no attempt to explain this insult,¹ Mary Beard suggests three possibilities: the rough soles scratched his face; this type of footwear made him appear effeminate because it was worn by women; the *socci* made him look like a buffoon because they were part of the costume of Roman comedy.² An examination of the role of shoes in insults suggests yet another possibility.

The belief that it was an insult to be touched by the sole of a shoe was widespread in the ancient world. At Psalms 60:8 and 108:9, Yahweh says: 'Moab is my washbasin, upon Edom I cast my shoe, over Philistia I shout in triumph.'³ This idea has survived in Arab cultures. For example, Iraqis insulted Saddam Hussein by striking his statue with their shoes, and an Iraqi reporter threw his shoe at George W. Bush during a press conference while shouting 'This is a farewell, you dog.'⁴ Earlier, Saddam Hussein installed a floor mosaic depicting George H.W. Bush at the entrance to the Al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad so that guests would have to step on it whenever they

¹ H. Smilda, *C. Suetonii Tranquilli Vita Diui Claudii* (Groningen, 1896), 32 notes that *socci* were suitable for this practical joke because they did not have laces. Cf. Isid. *Etym.* 19.34.12 *socci—saccum habent, in quo pars plantae inicitur—nam socci non ligantur, sed tantum intromittuntur*. D. Hurley, *Suetonius Diuus Claudius* (Cambridge, 2001), 89 adds that they were 'worn by women, comic actors and effeminate men'.

² M. Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley, 2014), 143–4. See also W. Kierdorf, *Sueton: Leben des Claudius und Nero* (Paderborn, 1992), 86: 'Die *socci* sind leichte Schuhe, die in Rom nur von Frauen und Weichlingen getragen wurden.'

³ This translation is from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York, 1973). See also J. Nacht, 'The symbolism of the shoe with special reference to Jewish sources', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 6 (1915), 1–22, at 5–7.

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/04/09/sprj.irq.statue/index.html> (accessed April 16, 2021) and <https://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/12/14/bush.iraq/> (accessed April 16, 2021).

passed through the door.⁵ This recalls the burial of the Meroë head of Augustus at the entrance to a shrine so that those who entered would insult the emperor by stepping on him.⁶ Similarly, Ovid (*Met.* 6.98–100) records a myth in which Juno turns the daughters of Cinyras into the steps of her Cypriot temple, most likely so that her worshippers will tread upon them every time they enter and exit the *cella*.⁷ This type of insult was also employed in Europe. According to Ammianus Marcellinus (19.11.10), one of the rebellious Limigantes, who lived in modern Romania, threw a shoe at Constantius II while he was giving a speech. In his discussion of Greek vases that depict men striking boys and prostitutes with sandals, Yael Young concludes that the shoe is ‘a social agent of control and humiliation’ in this context.⁸ The same action occurs in one of the erotic frescoes from the suburban baths at Pompeii, which depicts a foursome in which a man penetrates a *cinaedus* from behind while raising his arm above his head. The faint trace of an object in his hand is probably the shoe with which he intends to strike the *cinaedus*.⁹ Finally, Caligula demeaned Pompeius Pennus, whom he had just pardoned, by forcing him to kiss his gilded and bejewelled *soccus*, an act that Seneca equates with trampling on the state (*non hoc est rem publicam calcare?* *Ben.* 2.12).¹⁰ This Roman practice survives in the Italian expressions ‘calpestrare la faccia’ and ‘non farsi mettere i piedi in testa’, both of which refer to insult and humiliation.¹¹

When Claudius rubs his face with the *socci*, he is insulted because he is being touched by their soles. The insult, however, is inflicted not by the *coprae* who have placed the slippers on his hands but by Claudius himself, as the phrase *ut ... faciem sibimet confricaret* indicates. The owner of these *socci* may be important for a complete understanding of the insult. Since they were commonly worn by women, the *coprae* could have obtained them from one of the female guests at the party, but the joke would have greater force if they belonged to Caligula himself, who sometimes wore *socci muliebres* (Suet. *Calig.* 52.6–7; Plin. *HN* 37.17). Through this insult, the emperor, who kept his uncle alive as an object of derision (Suet. *Calig.* 23), is asserting his dominance over Claudius in a demeaning way in front of a room full of aristocrats.

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⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/10/world/baghdad-journal-a-new-graphic-message-from-saddam-hussein.html> (accessed April 16, 2021).

⁶ T. Opper, *The Meroë Head of Augustus* (London, 2014), 26–7.

⁷ S. O'Bryhim, 'Arachne's victory', *New England Classical Journal* 41 (2014), 288–302, at 293–4.

⁸ Y. Young, 'A painful matter: the sandal as a hitting implement in Athenian iconography', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7.64 (2020), 1–11, at 7.

⁹ J. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley, 1998), 235–6; J. Clarke, 'Representations of the *cinaedus* in Roman art', *Journal of Homosexuality* 49 (2005), 271–98, at 288–91.

¹⁰ For the use of *calcare* = 'to tread on insolently', see *OLD* s.v. *calco* 7.

¹¹ See Cardinal Galleffi, *Lucerina beatificationis et canonizationis serui dei P. Francisci Antonii* (Rome, 1832), 163: 'si faceva da suoi studenti calpestrare la faccia colle scarpe de' loro piedi prima sporcate tra sputi e poi poste sulla sua faccia dicendo a quelli "calpestate pure e premete la faccia di questo povere peccatore".'