

# Suffodit inguina

## *Genital attacks on Roman emperors and other primates*

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**ABSTRACT.** When Julius Caesar was stabbed, 23 times, on the Ides of March, at least one of the daggers is supposed to have gone into his groin. He wasn't the last Roman to have his privates attacked. And he wasn't the last primate. In competition for sexual access, gonads are occasionally targeted: canine incisions in monkey and ape scrota are not uncommon; and rumors had a number of Roman emperors—from Caligula and Nero, to Galba, Vitellius, Domitian, Commodus, Caracalla, Elagabalus, to Balbinus, Pupienus and Valerian over the course of the third century crisis—done in with their genitals at risk, or with their genitals cut off.

Key words: Sexual selection, human evolution, *Pan troglodytes*, eusociality, sterile castes

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Over 200 years ago, Edward Gibbon summed up the decline and fall of Roman emperors like this: “A life of pleasure or virtue, of severity or mildness, of indolence or glory, alike led to an untimely grave; and almost every reign is closed by the same disgusting repetition of treason and murder” (p. 327).<sup>1</sup>

But some emperors were more vulnerable than others. Toward the close of the twelfth century, before the Latins sacked the capital at Constantinople, Andronikos I Komnenos succeeded his cousin, Manuel I, as emperor of Rome. He was the handsomest of men, and he seduced many women. They included Theodora (Manuel's niece), Evdokia (another of Manuel's nieces), Philippa of Antioch (Manuel's sister-in-law) and (Manuel's daughter-in-law-to-be) Agnes of France. “The hideous and accursed lecher illicitly defiled marriage beds and despoiled virgins,” was the verdict of Niketas Choniates, the Greek historian and chancellor (*Annals*, 4.1.291); “there was not a beautiful nun in an abbey nor the daughter of a knight or burgess whom he did not lie with by force,” was the verdict of the Latin chronicler and bishop, William of Tyre (*Old French Continuation*, 13). He was like a stallion in heat. Andronikos would set out

for the countryside like a cock with his barnyard hens, or a he-goat with his she-goat herd, and approximate the sexual prowess of the cuttlefish, with aphrodisiacs from a Nilotic animal that resembled the crocodile.

So he made a bad end. One day, in the summer of 1185, he was bound in shackles in the imperial palace, where his right hand was cut off and an eye was gouged out; he was paraded through the agora on a mangy camel, where he was pelted with cow dung and ox belly secretions; then he was strung up between two poles in the Hippodrome, where his genitals were assaulted.

He wasn't the only emperor to die that way. When, over 1,200 years earlier, Julius Caesar was butchered at the foot of Pompey's statue, he's supposed to have been stabbed by his senators between the legs. A few generations later, Caligula was similarly disposed of by his guards; and after another generation, Nero just missed being spayed by his senate. Domitian, the last Flavian, was knifed in the groin by a slave. And by the time Constantine moved the capital to Constantinople, a number of promiscuous emperors—Galba and Vitellius, who flattered the last Caesars; Commodus, the last Antonine; several Severans; and a handful of third century *imperatores*—had been done in with their genitals exposed.

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Scrotal injuries have been inflicted on baboons (both *Papio anubis* and *Papio ursinus*), macaques (both *Macaca fascicularis* and *Macaca mulatta*) and chimpanzees (both *Pan paniscus* and *Pan troglodytes*)—by other baboons, macaques and chimps. In some cases, there have been witnesses to those attacks. In other cases, there have been witnesses to their effects.

On a late summer night in 1980, on an island in the Arnhem Zoo, a group of adult male chimpanzees was involved in a fight. Nikkie, the youngest, was uninjured; Yeroen, the oldest, was scratched and cut. But the alpha male, Luit—who died the next day of his wounds—was covered with deep gashes on his head, flanks, back and around his anus. Several fingernails and toes were lost. There were a number of small, canine incisions in his scrotum. And his testicles had dropped out.

The conflict seems to have had something to do with sexual access. Early that summer, an adult female, Krom, had come into estrus, and Yeroen had made overtures. But Nikkie and Luit, hair on end, had approached; and Yeroen had backed off. A couple of days later, they got into their first fight. Nikkie ended up with deep cuts on his fingers, toes, ears and flanks; Yeroen lost several nails and the tip of one toe. Luit got off with a scratch. But over the weeks that followed, both Krom and another adult female, Spin, were sexually receptive; and sexual advances were made by both Yeroen and Luit. In this case, Luit gave the impression that he was getting nervous. Then came the fatal fight.<sup>2,3</sup>

Castration in primates has become common knowledge since de Waal's report. At Masai Mara in Kenya, a new immigrant to an olive baboon (*Papio anubis*) troop survived a canine wound to his groin, near his scrotum, and soon rose to alpha status; at the Okavango Swamp in Botswana, a chacma baboon (*Papio ursinus*), another new immigrant, survived a canine wound close to his scrotum, on his thigh, and ended up as another alpha. Scrotal injuries have been inflicted on a long-tailed macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*) alpha, who retained his rank, and on a beta, who lost a testicle but recovered; a rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*) in the Asarori Forest, deeply wounded in one testicle after a run in with four males, soon died.<sup>3</sup>

The effects of gonad assaults have been witnessed in wild, not just captive, chimpanzees. At Wamba, Zaire, three adult male bonobos (*Pan paniscus*)—the “make love, not war” ape—were found missing both testicles.<sup>4</sup> And in Tanzania, at Gombe, when Jane Goodall caught

up with Dé, an adult male common chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*), a month after an attack, he limped with a deep gash to his inner thigh, and “his once large scrotum had shrunk to a fifth of its former size” (p. 38).<sup>5</sup> Similar incidents have been reported at other sites in Tanzania,<sup>6,7,8,9,10,11</sup> in Uganda,<sup>12,13,14</sup> in Gabon,<sup>15</sup> and on the Ivory Coast<sup>16</sup> (see discussion below). *H. sapiens* has not been exempt from such abuse.

Most Roman emperors competed for sexual access to their subjects. And probably at least partly as a result—like chimpanzees, baboons, macaques and a handful of other primates—they risked having their genitals attacked.

### Quantitative summary

By his settlement with the senate in 27 BC, Augustus became the first emperor of Rome. 41 years later he died of old age, just short of the age of 76. After another three centuries, in AD 330, Constantine inaugurated a new capital at Constantinople. He died there seven years later, at the age of 65, after a reign of around 31 years. From Augustus through Constantine, there were 56 Roman emperors; and very few of them died in their beds. One may have been struck by lightning, another probably drowned, some were suffocated or strangled, and many were poisoned or stabbed (see Table 1).<sup>17</sup>

Reign lengths for most Roman emperors were short (see Figure 1). Some 11 emperors lasted for less than 6 months; and another 9 held the office from 6 to 18 months—rounded off here to reigns of one year. Augustus' tenure was an outlier, and so was Constantine's: no other emperor lasted for more than 23 years, and half lasted for 6 years or less. The mean reign length for the 56 emperors who ruled Rome from Augustus through Constantine was just 8.4 years; and 0 years was the mode—rounded off for any reign of less than 6 months.

Many died violently (see Figure 2). Only 10 of these emperors (17 percent) died natural deaths. Biographers of another 7 emperors (12 percent) thought homicide was possible, and for all other emperors (71 percent) homicide was probably the cause of their demise. In 8 cases (14 percent), emperors were killed with their pants down: their genitals were compromised, but not unambiguously attacked. They died in their baths or their bedrooms, as they relieved themselves on the

**Table 1. Deaths of Roman emperors—Julius Caesar to Constantine I.**

<i>Emperor</i>	<i>Year of death</i>	<i>Cause of death</i>	<i>Homicide possible</i>	<i>Homicide probable</i>	<i>Genitals compromised</i>	<i>Genitals attacked</i>	<i>Source</i>
Caesar	44 BC	Assassinated by senators	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Suetonius Caesar 80–89 Plutarch Caesar 63–66 Dio 44.17–19
Augustus	14 AD	Illness/wife’s poison	Yes				Suetonius Aug 97–100 Dio 56.30–32
Tiberius	37 AD	Illness/suffocated/strangled/ poisoned by Caligula	Yes				Tacitus Annals 6.50 Suetonius Tiberius 72–73 Suetonius Caligula 12 Dio 58.28
Caligula	41 AD	Assassinated by guards	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Josephus JA 19.17–114 Suetonius Gaius 58 Dio 59.29
Claudius	54 AD	Wife’s poison	Yes	Yes			Tacitus Annals 12.66–68 Suetonius Claudius 44 Dio 60.34
Nero	68 AD	Assassinated by slave at Galba’s approach	Yes	Yes			Suetonius Nero 45–49 Dio 63.27–29 Aurelius Victor 5 Eutropius 7.15.11
Galba	69 AD	Assassinated by Otho’s soldiers	Yes	Yes	Yes		Tacitus Histories 1.40–49 Plutarch Galba 26–27 Suetonius Galba 19–20 Dio 63.4–6
Otho	69 AD	Suicide after loss to Vitellius	Yes	Yes			Tacitus Histories 2.46–49 Plutarch Otho 15–17 Suetonius Otho 9–11 Dio 63.11–15
Vitellius	69 AD	Assassinated by Vespasian’s soldiers	Yes	Yes	Yes		Tacitus Histories 3.84–85 Suetonius Vitellius 15–18 Dio 64.18–21
Vespasian	79 AD	Illness/Titus’ poison	Yes				Suetonius Vespasian 24 Dio 66.17
Titus	81 AD	Illness/assassinated by Domitian	Yes				Suetonius Titus 9–11, Dom 2 Dio 66.26 Philostratus 6.32 Aurelius Victor 10
Domitian	96 AD	Assassinated by slaves in his bath	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Suetonius Domitian 16–17 Dio 67.15–17 Aurelius Victor 11–12 Dio 68.4
Nerva	98 AD	Illness					Aurelius Victor 12 Dio 68.32–33
Trajan	117 AD	Illness					Aurelius Victor 13 Dio 69.20–22
Hadrian	138 AD	Illness					Aurelius Victor 14 AH Hadrian 23–25
Antoninus Pius	161 AD	Illness					Aurelius Victor 15 AH Pius 12
Lucius Verus	169 AD	Illness/Marcus Aurelius’ poison	Yes				Aurelius Victor 16 AH Verus 10–11 AH Marcus Aurelius 14.7– 8
Marcus Aurelius	180 AD	Illness	Yes				Herodian 1.4 Aurelius Victor 16 AH MA 27–28, Comm 19
Commodus	192 AD	Mistress’ poison/assassinated by wrestler after bath	Yes	Yes	Yes		Dio 73.22 Herodian 1.16–17 Aurelius Victor 17 AH Comm 17
Pertinax	193 AD	Assassinated by soldiers in bedroom	Yes	Yes			Dio 73.9–10 Herodian 2.5 Aurelius Victor 18 AH Pertinax 10–11

**Table 1. (Continued)**

<i>Emperor</i>	<i>Year of death</i>	<i>Cause of death</i>	<i>Homicide possible</i>	<i>Homicide probable</i>	<i>Genitals compromised</i>	<i>Genitals attacked</i>	<i>Source</i>
Didius Julianus	193 AD	Executed on senate's order	Yes	Yes			Dio 74.16–17 Herodian 2.12 Aurelius Victor 19 AH Julianus 7–8
Septimius Severus	211 AD	Illness	Yes				Dio 77.1.4, 14–15 Herodian 3.15 Aurelius Victor 20 AH SS 22–24
Geta	211 AD	Assassinated by Caracalla's soldiers	Yes	Yes			Dio 78.2 Herodian 4.4 AH Caracalla 2
Caracalla	217 AD	Assassinated by Macrinus' soldier	Yes	Yes	Yes		Dio 79.5–6 Herodian 4.12–13 Aurelius Victor 21 AH Caracalla 7
Macrinus	218 AD	Assassinated by Elagabalus' soldier	Yes	Yes			Dio 79.39–40 Herodian 5.4 Aurelius Victor 22 AH Macrinus 10, 15
Elagabalus	222 AD	Assassinated by Severus Alexander's soldiers	Yes	Yes	Yes		Dio 80.19–20 Herodian 5.8 AH Elagabalus 15–19, 33
Severus Alexander	235 AD	Assassinated by Maximinus' soldiers	Yes	Yes			Herodian 6.8–9 Aurelius Victor 24 AH SA 60–62
Gordian I	238 AD	Suicide	Yes	Yes			Herodian 7.9 AH Maximi 23–24
Gordian II	238 AD	Killed in battle w/ Maximinus	Yes	Yes			Herodian 7.9 AH Maximi 23–24
Maximinus	238 AD	Suicide/assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes			Herodian 8.5–6 Aurelius Victor 25 AH Maximi 23–24
Pupienus	238 AD	Assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes	Yes		Herodian 8.8 AH Max/Bal 13–14
Balbinus	238 AD	Assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes	Yes		Herodian 8.8 AH Max/Bal 13–14
Gordian III	244 AD	Assassinated by Philip's soldiers	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 27 AH Three Gordians 30–31
Philip the Arab	249 AD	Killed in battle with Decius	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 28 Zosimus 1.21–22
Decius	251 AD	Killed in battle with Goths	Yes	Yes			Lactantius DP 4 Aurelius Victor 29 Zosimus 1.23
Trebonius Gallus	253 AD	Assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 30–31 Zosimus 1.28 Jordanes Getica 106
Aemelian	253 AD	Assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 31 Zosimus 1.29
Valerian	260 AD	Killed after capture by Persian emperor Shapur	Yes	Yes	Yes		Lactantius DP 5 Aurelius Victor 32 Orosius 7.22 Peter the Patrician 4.188
Gallienus	268 AD	Assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes			Agathias 4.23 Aurelius Victor 33 Zosimus 1.40
Claudius Gothicus	270 AD	Illness					Aurelius Victor 34 AH Claudius 11–12 Zosimus 1.46
Quintillus	270 AD	Suicide/assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 34 AH Aurelian 37 Zosimus 1.47
Aurelian	275 AD	Assassinated by slaves	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 35 AH Aurelian 36–37 Zosimus 1.62

Table 1. (Continued)

<i>Emperor</i>	<i>Year of death</i>	<i>Cause of death</i>	<i>Homicide possible</i>	<i>Homicide probable</i>	<i>Genitals compromised</i>	<i>Genitals attacked</i>	<i>Source</i>
Tacitus	276 AD	Illness/assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 36 AH Tacitus 13 Zosimus 1.63
Florian	276 AD	Suicide/assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 36 AH Tacitus 14 Zosimus 1.64
Probus	282 AD	Assassinated by soldiers	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 37 AH Probus 21 Zosimus 1.71
Carus	283 AD	Illness/bolt of lightning					Eutropius 9.18 Aurelius Victor 38 AH Carus 8
Numerian	284 AD	Assassinated by father-in-law	Yes	Yes			Eutropius 9.18 Aurelius Victor 38 AH Numerian 14
Carinus	285 AD	Assassinated by jealous husband	Yes	Yes			Aurelius Victor 38 AH Carinus 18 Zosimus 1.72–73
Diocletian	305 AD	Abdicated					Lactantius DP 19 Eutropius 9.27–28 Aurelius Victor 39 Zosimus 2.7
Maximian	305 AD	Suicide/executed on Constantine I's orders	Yes	Yes			Lactantius DP 30 Eusebius VC 1.47 Eutropius 10.3
Constantius I	306 AD	Illness					Lactantius DP 24 Eutropius 10.1–2 Aurelius Victor 40
Severus	307 AD	Suicide/executed on Maximian's orders	Yes	Yes			Lactantius DP 26 Aurelius Victor 40 Zosimus 2.10
Galerius	311 AD	Illness					Lactantius DP 33 Eusebius EH 8.16 Zosimus 2.11
Maxentius	312 AD	Drowned after battle with Constantine I	Yes	Yes			Lactantius DP 44 Eusebius LC 1.38 Eusebius EH 9.9 Zosimus 2.16
Maximinus Daia	313 AD	Suicide after battle with Licinius	Yes	Yes			Lactantius DP 47–49 Eusebius LC 1.58–59 Aurelius Victor 41 Zosimus 2.17
Licinius	324 AD	Executed after battle with Constantine I	Yes	Yes			Eusebius LC 2.18–19 Anon Valesianus 5.29 Eutropius 10.5 Zosimus 2.28
Constantine I	337 AD	Illness					Eusebius LC 4.62–67 Zosimus 2.39

road, or after being undressed and dragged through the streets. But in 3 cases (5 percent), biographers were explicit that their privates were hacked at—which, according to some sources, was the case for the founder of the first imperial dynasty, on the Ides of March.

### Descriptive results

Swords to the genitals of Roman emperors were the stuff of urban legends. Hard evidence—epigraphic or

numismatic, archaeological or architectural, anatomic or genetic—is completely absent. There is nothing but narrative evidence, with few reports by eyewitnesses: generations often pass before an affront to the imperial privates is reported in the surviving sources; and as always, accounts vary according to bias. But the legend recurs.

Over the course of the first three Roman centuries, from Augustus through Constantine I, Caesar and a pair of Roman emperors—Caligula and Domitian—are sup-

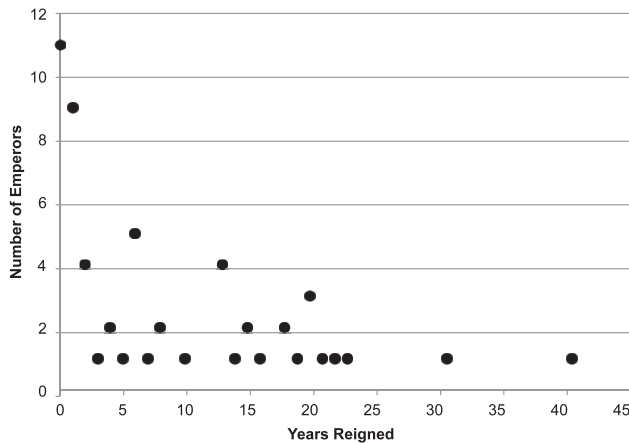


Figure 1. Lengths of emperors' reigns, rounded to nearest half year.

posed to have been killed with their genitals targeted. Nero, the last Caesar, may have avoided that fate when he had a slave take his life. And at least eight other emperors—Galba, Vitellius, Commodus, Caracalla, Elagabalus, Pupienus, Balbinus, and Valerian—are supposed to have been killed with their genitals exposed. Many were their dynasty's closers: after their murders, usurpers took over. And most were remembered as abusers of other men's daughters and wives.<sup>18,19,20,21</sup>

*Caesar*

Caesar built an empire; he lusted like an emperor; he passed his empire on to generations of kin; and he died like an emperor—with a blade to his groin.

One day in the middle of February of 44 BC, a fertility festival was put on in Rome. Caesar sat on his gold throne in the middle of the Forum, wearing his purple gown. And Marc Antony—his drunk, naked and anointed friend—ran up and offered him a crown, three times. Caesar turned it down, but the gesture wasn't lost on the crowd. "While all slavery is wretched, it is especially intolerable to be slaves of a man debauched," were Cicero's words (Cicero, *Philippics*, 2.85, 3.12). A month later the dictator was dead, and Cicero was glad. Caesar's assassins were magnificent, he thought, heroes in the Homeric sense: nothing made him happier than what happened on the Ides of March (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, 14.4.2, 14.6.1). But neither he, nor any other contemporary, said a word about Caesar being castrated.

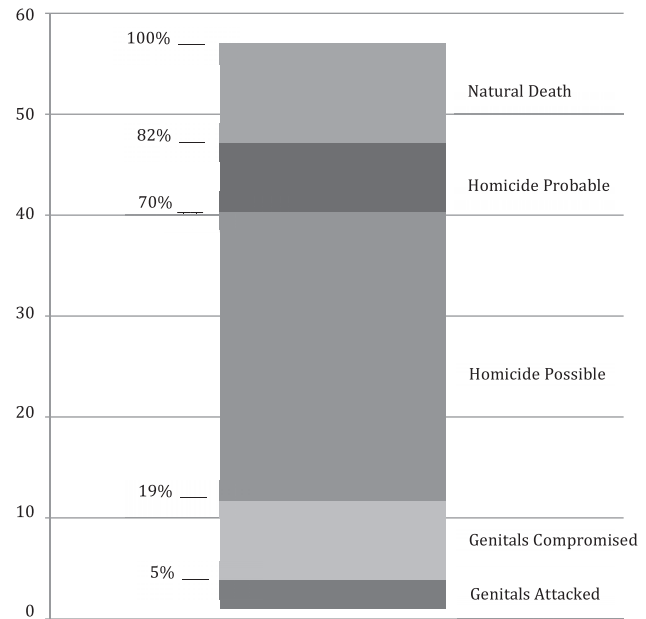


Figure 2. Circumstances of Caesar's and emperors' deaths.

A generation after Caesar was assassinated, Nicolaus of Damascus put together a more extended account. He remembered how, at the Lupercalia feast, Marc Antony—well-oiled and undressed except for a girdle—rushed up and offered Caesar a crown. And he remembered how a month later in the senate, on the Ides of March, Servilius Casca struck with a dagger across Caesar's left shoulder, then Cassius Longinus' blade hit Caesar's face. Casca's brother put a sword through Caesar's side, and Decimus Brutus struck him through the thigh (Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus*, F130.21–24).

Suetonius, who wrote imperial biographies, and had access to the imperial archives, remembered how Caesar's philandering made other men mad. There were rumors of his affairs with Marcus Brutus' sister, Tertia—who was offered up to Caesar, in order to get a cut rate on an estate; and with Marcus Brutus' mother, Servilia—who was the woman Caesar loved best. Suetonius had Decimus Brutus, one of Marcus Brutus' cousins, lead Caesar to the senate door. And more than a century after the fact, he added Caesar's response after Marcus Brutus showed up. *Et tu, Brute?* is how Shakespeare remembered it, over 1,600 years later. καὶ σὺ τέκνον—And you, my son?—were Suetonius' words (Suetonius, *Caesar*, 50.1–2, 81–82; Shakespeare,

*Julius Caesar*, 3.1; cf. Dio, *Roman History*, 44.16–19; Appian, *Civil Wars*, 2.112–17).

But it was Plutarch—who wrote his *Lives* of noble Romans within years of Suetonius’ *Lives* of the Caesars—who was most specific about what Marcus Brutus hit. Βροῦτος αὐτῷ πληγὴν ἐνέβαλε μίαν εἰς τὸν βουβῶνα, he wrote. Brutus dug into his groin (Plutarch, *Caesar*, 66.6, with Plutarch *Cato the Younger*, 24, *Pompey*, 47 and *Brutus*, 5).<sup>22,23,24</sup>

### Caligula

Caesar’s heirs became emperors, and every member of his dynasty was rumored to have been murdered. Both Tiberius and Claudius—Augustus’ stepson and step-grandson—got away with their privates intact. But both Caligula and Nero—Augustus’ great-grandson and great-great-grandson—were the victims of emasculation plots. Nero’s assisted suicide preempted the scourging of his scrotum, on the senate’s orders; and Gaius, also known as “Caligula,” was run through by his bodyguard, between the legs.

Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, who was sent off to Corsica after an affair with the emperor’s sister, remembered how Caligula abused his subjects. Among others the senator, Valerius Asiaticus, was insulted at a public banquet. “Using his loudest voice, Gaius taunted this man with the way his wife behaved in sexual intercourse. Ye gods! What a tale for the ears of a husband! What a fact for an emperor to know!” And among others the praetorian, Cassius Chaerea, was insulted in the field. “When he asked for the watchword, Gaius would give him sometimes ‘Venus,’ and sometimes ‘Priapus,’ seeking to taunt the man of arms, in one way or another, with wantonness” (Seneca, *On Firmness*, 18.2–5; Chaerea plays a castrate in Terence’s *Eunuch*).

Josephus, who was born in the year that Caligula became an emperor, followed up with an extended account of the emperor’s death. After the murder, there were rumors that Valerius Asiaticus was a ringleader: “I wish I had been the man” (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.1.20). But Charaea deserved most of the credit. One day when Caligula was on his way out of the theater, his praetorian struck: his sword hit the emperor between his shoulder and neck, then a handful of other conspirators finished him off. “For tyrants are not content to gain their sweet pleasure, and this by acting injuriously, and in the vexation they bring both upon men’s estates and

their wives; but they look upon that to be their principal advantage,” was the senate’s verdict (*Jewish Antiquities*, 19.2.2). This emperor was a slave to his bliss, and had criminal conversation with his own sister.

Suetonius elaborated on that. “He respected neither his own chastity nor that of anyone else” (Suetonius, *Gaius*, 36.1). Caligula committed incest with all three of his sisters, and took Julia Drusilla, the sister he liked best, away from her husband, the senator Lucius Cassius Longinus—“openly treating her as his lawfully married wife” (*Gaius*, 24.1). He also abducted the wife of his praetorian prefect, Naevius Sutorius Macro—“swearing to marry her if he became emperor” (*Gaius*, 12.2). He attended the wedding of the senator Gaius Piso—“but had the bride carried off to his own house;” and he sent for the senator Gaius Memmius’ wife—“because somebody had remarked that her grandmother was once a famous beauty” (*Gaius*, 25.1–2). The wives of other senators were sequestered over supper. “After inviting a selection of them to dinner with their husbands he would slowly and carefully examine each in turn while they passed his couch, as a purchaser might assess the value of a slave;” women who appealed to him would be escorted out of the room, after which the emperor made unsolicited comments on their sexual performances (*Gaius*, 36.2). Other women were prostituted to friends. A suite of rooms was set aside in the palace, and the emperor opened a brothel, then stocked it with married women; slaves were sent out to invite men, young and old, to become Contributors to the Revenue of Rome (*Gaius*, 41.1; cf. Dio, *Roman History*, 59.11–12).

Suetonius reported a couple of versions of Caligula’s demise, and had Chaerea carry the sword. In the first, when the emperor was out for a walk, he had Chaerea come up from behind and leave a deep gash in his neck, after which another soldier stabbed him in the chest. And in the second, he had Chaerea strike first and split the emperor’s jaw, then he had a number of other soldiers hit him between the legs, and finish him off. *Quidam etiam per obscaena ferrum adegerunt*: they thrust their swords through the imperial privates, and Caligula was dispatched (Suetonius, *Gaius*, 58.2–3; cf. Tacitus, *Annals*, 11.1; Dio, *Roman History*, 59.29).<sup>25</sup>

### Nero

Caligula’s nephew avoided that fate. But it was close. The last Julian emperor, Augustus’ great-great-

grandson, Nero, was had up for assaults of various sorts on other men's wives. For which he just missed being neutered.

There were rapes in the streets. Disguised as a slave, the emperor would wander through town, and hang out in cathouses with soldiers and gladiators and friends. Faustus Cornelius Sulla Felix, a former consul, was suspected of a plot to attack the emperor after a profligate night out, so was thrown out of town; and when the emperor molested Julius Montanus' wife in the street, the senator struck back—for which he was encouraged to take his own life. "Rome by night came to resemble a conquered city," were Tacitus' words (Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.25, 47; cf. Suetonius, *Nero*, 26.1–2; Dio, *Roman History*, 61.8.1–9.4).

Otherwise, there were orgies in the Campus Martius and the Circus Maximus, or on Marcus Agrippa's lake. Rafts with gold and ivory fittings were floated on wine casks; highborn matrons played the part of innkeepers and solicited from shore, as common prostitutes gestured indecently from the quays. "He gave parties in public places as if the whole city were his home," is how Tacitus described it (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.37; cf. Suetonius, *Nero*, 27.2–3; Dio, *Roman History*, 62.15.1–6).

There were the usual named consorts. There was Silia, the wife of a senator, who knew the emperor's obscenities from personal experience; there was Calvia Crispinilla, the emperor's *magistra libidinum*, or instructor in lust, whose husband worked in the state department; there was Statilia Messalina, whose husband, the consul Vestinus Atticus, the emperor murdered in order to get her; there was the *superbam paelicem*, or proud whore, Poppaea Sabina, stolen from Marcus Salvius Otho—who ended up as emperor a decade later (Tacitus *Annals*, 13.46, 16.20; Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.13, 73; Suetonius, *Nero*, 35.1; Pseudo-Seneca, *Octavia*, line 125).

So there was a movement to turn Nero into a eunuch. Three years after a failed conspiracy in AD 65, the emperor was declared a public enemy by his senate. They wanted him punished *more maiorum*: in the traditional fashion—*nudi hominis cervicem inseri furcae, corpus virgis ad necem caedi*: stripped, fastened by the neck in a fork, and beaten to death with rods (Suetonius, *Nero*, 49.2). Instead, with a little help from Epaphroditus, a "Lover of Venus," his slave, Nero committed suicide (Suetonius, *Nero*, 49.3; cf. Dio,

*Roman History*, 59.8.7–8; Aurelius Victor, *Lives of the Caesars*, 5.7; Eutropius, *Abridgement*, 7.15.1; *Digest*, 48.9.9).<sup>26</sup>

### *Galba and Vitellius*

Four men succeeded to the empire in the year after Nero died. Otho, who came second, ended up taking his own life; and Vespasian, who founded his own dynasty, came last. But Galba and Vitellius, who came first and third, were done in with their genitals at risk. Galba was mutilated below the waist; and Vitellius was covered with little cuts.

Both were cut from Neronian cloth. Galba was related to Livia Augusta—who was Tiberius' mother; he was considered as a husband for Agrippina—before she married Claudius; and he was promoted by Nymphidius Sabinus—arguably one of Caligula's bastards—after Nero died. Old and feeble when he became an emperor, he lasted for less than seven months (Suetonius, *Galba*, 5.2; Plutarch, *Galba*, 2–3, 9.1; Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.6, *Annals*, 15.72).

Vitellius lasted for eight. He grew up at Capri, one of Tiberius' boy toys; and he stayed on at court. "Stained by every sort of baseness as he advanced in years, he held a prominent place at the palace, winning the intimacy of Gaius by his devotion to chariots and of Claudius by his passion for dice. But he was still dearer to Nero" (Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 4.1). Then after he became an emperor, his progress toward Rome was a riot. "It was accompanied by players and herds of eunuchs and all the other idiosyncrasies of Nero's entourage. For Vitellius was a personal devotee of Nero" (Tacitus, *Histories*, 2.71; cf. Dio, *Roman History*, 63.1–15, 64.4.2).<sup>27</sup>

Plutarch, who finished his course on philosophy in Athens shortly before Nero died, remembered that when the soldiers threw their javelins at Galba in the Forum, a centurion was gelded in his defense. Galba might, or might not, have shared that fate. "After receiving many wounds in his legs and arms, he was slain, as most writers say, by a certain Camurius, of the fifteenth legion" (Plutarch, *Galba*, 26–27). Afterwards, his head was removed.

Tactius, who was a teenager when Galba became an emperor, more or less repeated that story. Camurius slit his throat, then the others followed up. *Ceteri crura brachiaque (nam pectus tegebatur) foede laniavere; pleraque vulnera feritate et saevitia trunco iam corpori*



*adiecta*: the rest of them (as his chest was protected) horribly mangled his legs and arms; wounds were inflicted with savage ferocity even on the headless trunk (Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.41).

Suetonius, who was born in the year that Galba died, had little to add. “His followers abandoned him, and he was butchered.” After his head was cut off, the soldiers made fun of it. *Galba cupido*, “enjoy your vigor,” they joked (Suetonius, *Galba*, 19.2, 20.2).

Tacitus had Vitellius, like Galba, done in in the Forum. As Vespasian approached with his army, this emperor was hauled from his hiding place in the palace. His hands were tied behind his back, and he was led away with his clothes in shreds. “He fell lifeless beneath a rain of blows. And still the mob reviled him in death as viciously as they had flattered him while he lived” (Tacitus, *Histories*, 3.84–85).

Suetonius filled in the blanks. As the troops dragged Vitellius off, half naked with his clothes in tatters, along the Sacred Way to the Forum, dung was hurled and his bodily defects were mocked. Then came the little cuts. “The soldiers put him through the torture of *minutissimis ictibus* before finally killing him near the Stairs of Mourning.” The last blow was struck by soldier called Antonius Primus *Becco*, a.k.a. “Rooster’s Beak” (Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 17.1–2, 18.1).<sup>28</sup>

### Domitian

The last man to become a Roman emperor in AD 69 was succeeded by his sons. Vespasian’s oldest son, Titus, who kept troops of eunuchs to look after his own women at court, might have committed incest with his brother’s wife (Suetonius, *Titus*, 7.1, 10.2). And Vespasian’s younger son, Domitian, was survived by a handful of contemporaries who desecrated his memory. All of them were upset about his sexual excesses, and one had him stabbed in the groin.

Juvenal called him a hypocrite. “When you-know-who was reviving those stern laws against adultery, even Mars and Venus blushed, but all the while he himself was flouting the law, and spiced his crime with a dash of incest” (Juvenal, *Satires*, 2.29–33). Martial, who *was* hypocritical, got honest about his Lord and God, or *dominus et deus*, after Domitian died. “When you want to go visit a distant lover, for sure, now, Paula, you’ll not be telling that stupid husband of yours, ‘Caesar’s ordered me off to Alba tomorrow first thing’” (Martial, *Epigrams*, 5.8, 10.73, 11.7). Tacitus

had Domitian playing the part of an emperor’s son, so far as seducing single girls (*stuprum*) and hitting on married women (*adulterium*) went—the minute Vespasian moved into the palace (Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.2). And Pliny, who was Tacitus’ friend, took for granted the emperor’s acts of rape and incestuous nights with Julia, Domitian’s brother’s daughter (Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 4.11, *Panegyric*, 52.3, 63.7; cf. Suetonius, *Domitian*, 1.3, 10.2, 22.1; Dio, *Roman History*, 66.3.4, 67.3.2).

So his genitals were attacked. Domitian was stuck with a hidden dagger in his bath by a slave. *Suffodit inguina*: Stephanus dug into his groin. The emperor fought back, but was subdued by various gladiators and guards, who stabbed him seven more times (Suetonius, *Domitian*, 17.1–2, with 14.1 and 15.1; cf. Dio, *Roman History*, 67.15–17; Eutropius, *Abridgement of History*, 8.1). Parthenius, his *cubicularius*, or bedroom attendant, had taken the blade from Domitian’s sword. So afterwards his testicles were cut off, and stuffed into his mouth (Aurelius Victor, *Lives of the Caesars*, 12.8).<sup>29</sup>

### Commodus

A period of calm followed. Nerva, the sexagenarian hand-picked by the senate to succeed Domitian, was followed by a string of emperors who lacked legitimate sons. Then Marcus Aurelius left Rome to its first born emperor, or *natus imperator*. He was oversexed; and—very much after the fashion of Domitian—he was done in after his bath.

Brought up by his philosopher father, he must have been told it was best to resist the murmurs of the flesh (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7.55). But Marcus Aurelius’ son had opportunities his father lacked. “Commodus had given himself up to chariot racing and licentiousness and performed scarcely any of the duties pertaining to his office” (Dio, *Roman History*, 73.10.2). He had no set time for sleeping, or anything else—“he indulged in all kinds of pleasures, to which he was a willing slave at any hour” (Herodian, *History*, 1.17.9).

A lost biography by Marius Maximus—who became a senator under this emperor—was worked into the *Augustan History* of Commodus’ reign. “Even as a boy he was base and dishonorable, and cruel and lewd, defiled of mouth, moreover, and debauched,” Maximus probably wrote (*Augustan History*, Commodus, 1.7).

He wasn't any better after he grew up. There were nights out in the *lupanaria* around Rome ("he would drink till dawn and squander the resources of the Roman empire, and in the evening he flitted through the taverns to the brothels"); and there were more *lupanaria* at home ("he herded together women of unusual beauty, keeping them like purchased prostitutes in a sort of brothel for the violation of their chastity") (*Augustan History*, Commodus, 2.8, 3.7). There were baths and banquets in the palace, with the wives of 300 subjects (*matronarum meretricumque*), and another 300 whores (*puberibus exoletis*), "collected by force and by purchase indiscriminately from the common people and nobles solely on the basis of bodily beauty" (*Augustan History*, Commodus, 5.4). Commodus wore women's clothes, and had his hair sprinkled with gold dust.

So on New Year's Eve of AD 193, Herodian—who was probably a civil servant from Antioch—had the emperor assassinated after one of his baths. A mistress, called Marcia, and Eclectus, his *cubicularius*, had discovered a wax tablet with their names written on it; "Commodus wanted all the elder statesmen and the advisers appointed for him by his father, those who still survived, to be put to death" (Herodian, *History*, 1.16–17; cf. Dio, *Roman History*, 67.15.3–5). They gave him a cup of wine mixed with poison, after his ablutions were over; then they brought in Narcissus, a wrestler, to strangle him in his bedroom.

Cassius Dio—who sat with the other senators in Commodus' circus—came up with a similar account. Marcia administered poison in a hunk of beef; then they sent in the wrestler, καὶ δι' ἐκείνου λούμενον αὐτὸν ἀπέπνιξαν: and Narcissus strangled him in his bath (Dio, *Roman History*, 73.21–22; cf. *Augustan History*, Commodus, 17.1–2).<sup>30</sup>

### *Caracalla*

The empire was next offered to Pertinax, who lasted for 87 days, and he was succeeded by Didius Julianus, who lasted for less than 6 months. Septimius Severus, the African emperor who came after, died in his bed after an 18-year reign. The empire was left to Severus' two sons, but both met violent ends. First the younger son, Geta, was assassinated in his mother's arms; then Caracalla was assassinated on the road to Edessa, with his pants pulled down.

Caracalla is supposed to have violated a Roman priestess, one of the Vestal Virgins—then had her put to death; and he's supposed to have violated his own mother—or stepmother, in this case. He was corrupted by luxury and vice; and he was dishonest. "For though he had shown himself the most adulterous of men—so long, that is, as he had the power—he not only detested others who were charged with the same thing, but even slew them in violation of all law" (Dio, *Roman History*, 78.16.1–4; cf. Herodian, *History*, 3.10.3, 3.13.5, 4.9.3 *Augustan History*, Caracalla, 10.1–4).

So one day in AD 217, at the end of his 6-year reign, Cassius Dio had him done in by his praetorian prefect, Macrinus—with a little help from his soldier, Martialis. On the road from Edessa to Carrhae, the emperor dismounted from his horse, ὅπως ἀποπατήσῃ: in order to relieve himself. Martialis approached, and struck with a small dagger. Then pretending to come to his rescue, the tribunes finished him off (Dio, *Roman History*, 79.5.4–5).

Herodian backed that up. On his way to a temple of the moon god, the emperor stopped with a stomachache; so his modest escort rode off, and left Martialis as his only attendant. Standing over Caracalla after he uncovered himself, the soldier stabbed the emperor from behind with a hidden dagger. "The emperor continually insulted the man, by calling him a woman" (Herodian, *History*, 4.13.1–5; cf. Aurelius Victor, *Lives of the Caesars*, 21.5–6).

The account in the *Historia Augusta* comes close. On his journey to Carrhae from Edessa, Commodus dismounted *vesicae gratia*: in order to gratify his bladder. Then an equerry stuck a dagger in his side, "and all shouted that it had been done by Martialis" (*Augustan History*, Caracalla, 7.1–2; cf. *Augustan History*, Macrinus, 4.7–8).<sup>31,32</sup>

### *Elagabalus*

Around the start of the third century, by one of his cousins, Caracalla was supposed to have fathered a son (see Dio, *Roman History*, 79.32; Herodian, *History*, 5.3.10; *Augustan History*, Caracalla, 9.2, Elagabalus, 1.4, 2.1). Elagabalus was even more dissipated, and more ignobly done in, than Caracalla had been.

Odd stories were told about this emperor castrating himself. They said he promoted the Syrian sun god, Elagabal, "by circumcising himself and abstaining from swine's flesh;" that "he had planned, indeed, to cut off

his genitals altogether,” but had his friends circumcised instead; that “he carried his lewdness to such a point that he asked the physicians to contrive a woman’s vagina in his body by means of an incision,” at whatever cost (Dio, *Roman History*, 80.11–16). “Indeed, for him, life was nothing but a search for pleasures” (*Augustan History*, Elagabalus, 18.6).

Other stories were told about sex. “Concerning his life many filthy anecdotes have been put into writing,” the *Augustan History* began (Elagabalus, 18.4). It was said that he violated another Vestal Virgin, then married her; that he never had intercourse with the same woman twice, except his wife; that he bought prostitutes from their procurers, then set them free; that he travelled with as many as 600 carriages, brought together to accommodate the vast number of his partners in depravity; and, that he harnessed the most beautiful women to wheelbarrows, in two’s, three’s, or four’s, then drove them about in the nude, usually naked himself. Elagabalus opened another whorehouse in the palace for the benefit of his friends—though other friends were less well accommodated. Some got shut up in hostels with old hags from Ethiopia, and not let out all night; others got locked up with lions, leopards, bears and panthers in an inebriated state, “and some even died of this cause” (*Augustan History*, Elagabalus, 25.1; cf. Dio, *Roman History*, 80.13–16; Herodian, *History*, 5.5–8). Sometimes the emperor laughed so loud that nobody else could be heard.

So they butchered him in the road. Dio had Elagabalus attacked in the praetorian camp: his head, and his mother’s, were cut off. “And their bodies, after being stripped naked, were first dragged all over the city, and then the mother’s body was cast aside somewhere or other, while his was thrown into the river” (Dio, *Roman History*, 80.20.2).

Herodian seconded that. One day the praetorians saw the emperor dancing in gold necklaces and makeup, so they killed him along with his mother. “When the bodies had been dragged throughout the city, the mutilated corpses were thrown into the public sewer which flows into the Tiber” (Herodian, *History*, 5.8.8–9).

The *Augustan History* was more graphic. First the soldiers attacked Elagabalus’ associates in lewdness: “some they slaughtered by tearing out their vitals, and others they pierced up the anus.” Then they went after

the emperor himself. *Post hoc in eum impetus factus est atque in latrina ad quam confugerat occisus*: they killed him in a bathroom. “For who could endure a prince of this sort, who was the recipient of lust in every orifice of his body?” (*Augustan History*, Elagabalus, 5.2, 16.5–17.3). His corpse was dragged through the streets, stuffed into a sewer, hauled around the track at the circus, and thrown into the Tiber.<sup>33</sup>

### *Pupienus and Balbinus*

A succession of short-lived emperors followed. All but one probably died violently; and at least a pair of emperors, Pupienus and Balbinus, who ruled together in 238 for three months, were offed with their gonads at risk.

These emperors were past consuls and prefects, selected by the senate for their hard work and moderate ways of life; they were honored and respected as patriotic rulers of the empire, as Herodian’s *History* remembered. But one day, the praetorians rushed in. They grabbed the old emperors, and stripped off their robes. “Dragging the two men naked from the palace, they inflicted every insult and indignity upon them” (Herodian, *History*, 8.8.6). Both emperors were beaten and tortured, then brought to the camp from the palace, so they might suffer longer. When at last they were put to death, their corpses lay exposed in the street.

The *Augustan History* exonerated one of these emperors but pointed a finger at the other. Pupienus, who was very brave, was “exceedingly continent in the ways of love;” but Balbinus, who had more money, was “excessive in his pleasures.” That didn’t matter: the biographer left both emperors dead in the road, as Herodian had. *Milites supervenerunt atque ambos eos nudatos vestibus regalibus de Palatio cum iniuriis produxerunt*: the soldiers had them stripped of their palace vestments and loaded with insults. They were hauled all over town, and abandoned in the middle of the road (*Augustan History*, Maximus and Balbinus, 6.1, 7.4, 14.5–6).

### *Valerian*

A couple of decades later, Valerian was captured by the Persian emperor, Sapor. Hostile writers had him used as a human footstool; and some had him flayed alive.

That was unwarranted, as far as his countrymen were concerned. “Valerian’s life is a censorship,” were his senators’ words. Sapor, on the other hand, was bad. When a general was sent to avenge Valerian’s captivity, “he captured the king’s treasures and he captured, too, what the Parthian monarchs hold dearer than treasures, namely his concubines” (*Augustan History*, Two Valerians, 4.3, 5.4; cf. Zonaras 12.23).

Paulus Orosius—who dedicated his *History Against the Pagans* to St. Augustine, his teacher—had Valerian, a heathen emperor, grow old as a slave. “For he was condemned for the term of his life to perform the menial service of helping the king mount his horse, not by giving him his hand, but by bending to the ground and offering his back” (Orosius, *History Against the Pagans*, 7.22.4; cf. Aurelius Victor, *Lives of the Caesars*, 32.6).

And Lactantius—who taught a son of the Christian emperor, Constantine I—had Valerian flayed. Used as a human footstool, he wasted away as a slave; then after the emperor died, they skinned his hide. “His skin, stripped from his flesh, was dyed with vermillion, and placed in the temple of the gods of the barbarians,” to be exhibited as an admonition to the Romans (Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 5.5–6).

Agathias—a lawyer who wrote histories in Justinian’s time—implied that Valerian was captured and flayed alive. The skin was torn from his neck, ripped off in one piece down to his feet, turned inside out, then inflated like a wineskin and suspended from a pole. “A pitiful and disgusting spectacle” (Agathias, *Histories*, 4.23.2–7).<sup>34</sup>

## Discussion

In his 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin introduced his theory of sexual selection. “This depends, not on a struggle for existence, but on a struggle between the males for possession of the females; the result is not death to the unsuccessful competitor, but few or no offspring,” he wrote (p. 88).<sup>35</sup> A dozen years later, he elaborated in his book *On the Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Across taxa—from insects to fishes, reptiles to birds to mammals—he described adaptations of sound and ornament, by which males are able to attract females, and adaptations of offense or defense, by

which they’re able to fend off their rivals. As Darwin famously summed up: “It is certain that with almost all animals there is a struggle between the males for the possession of the female. This fact is so notorious that it would be superfluous to give instances” (p. 259).<sup>36</sup>

Over the last few decades, evidence that male-male competition comes with a genetic payoff has been accumulating for primates. Winning tends to improve the number and timing of copulations in monkeys, and in apes—from gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla*), to bonobos (*Pan paniscus*), to common chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*).<sup>37,38,39,40</sup> But competitors are often injured, occasionally between the legs.

In the years since de Waal first described the castration of an alpha male, Luit, by a coalition of two other males in an Arnhem Zoo cage, a number of fatal attacks have been reported in *Pan*. Many have been effects of intercommunity aggression. *Pan troglodytes* often make forays along the borders of neighboring territories, where they castrate or kill resident males. At Kibale Park in Uganda, five out of six adult male victims of lethal, intergroup aggression were castrated;<sup>41,42</sup> and others have been emasculated in Tanzania, Gabon and on the Ivory Coast. Overall, close to half of the identified adult male victims of violence between chimpanzee groups have had some or all of their genitalia removed—9/22, or 41 percent, by a recent count.<sup>43,44</sup>

Others have been assaulted within groups. At Mahale in Tanzania, the “unparalleled leader” of M Group, Ntologi, was found cut on the wrist, thumbs, arm, back, head, and lip after a fatal attack.<sup>7,8</sup> At Budongo in Uganda, after the youngest and lowest ranking male, Zesta, was fatally struck on his limbs and thorax, fecal samples from the alpha male, Duane, contained pieces of his flesh.<sup>45</sup> At Kibale, also in Uganda, a young adult male, Grapelli, was bitten by the alpha male and others on his head, shoulders, hands and feet at least.<sup>46</sup> And in Tanzania, at Gombe, an old male named Huxley was mortally, if non-specifically, wounded by a member of his troop.<sup>10</sup> In a few cases, the victims were explicitly said to have their genitals damaged. One story comes from Mahale—where an alpha male, Pimu, died of wounds to his extremities and torso, anus and scrotum.<sup>11</sup> And three accounts come from Gombe. When another alpha male, Goblin, was overthrown, he was left with an injured and infected scrotum—but treated by veterinarians.<sup>47</sup> Another alpha male, Vincent, who had

already been injured, was fatally attacked, with his genitals ripped off.<sup>43,48</sup> And the infamous former alpha, Frodo, died of an infected testis after a puncture wound to his scrotum, probably inflicted by the canine of a disgruntled troop member. “As ye sow, so shall ye reap,” was Michael Wilson’s obit.<sup>43,49</sup>

Over the last few decades, evidence that male-male competition comes with a genetic payoff has been accumulating for humans, too. In the small societies of prehistory—from Botswana to the Orinoco River Basin—status is consistently related to reproductive success.<sup>50,51,52</sup> And in the empires of history—from the Near East, to Egypt, India, China, and the Mediterranean—emperors consistently collected thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of women.<sup>20,53,54</sup> But competitors were often brutally attacked, occasionally between the legs.

Millennia after the severed genitals of war captives were carved into the Narmer Palette, or on the walls at Medinet Habu,<sup>55</sup> and centuries after Herodotus had the Persians warn the Greeks that their best-looking boys would be “chosen for castration and turned into eunuchs,” and their best-looking girls would be “dragged from their homes and sent to Darius’ court” (Herodotus, *Histories*, 6.10, 32), the Roman empire held as many as six million slaves.<sup>56</sup> Many of those slaves were captives, and many of those captives were eunuchs.<sup>57</sup>

Many emperors were sexual predators. And occasionally an emperor was castrated. They stole women at the altar, or sequestered them over dinner; they prostituted women at the palace, or at public banquets; they desecrated Vestal Virgins, and molested women on the street; they had affairs with the wives, daughters, sisters and mothers of their senators, state department officers, consuls and future emperors. Some ended up emasculated. Mutilated corpses were dragged through the circus and stuffed into sewers; wounds were savagely inflicted on headless trunks; swords were thrust into genitals; assassins dug into groins.

Ancient history, and natural history, in a nutshell.

## Note

*Ian Morris combed through every paragraph with enormous kindness, checking my classical sources; Anthony Birley*

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