

ROMAN SANDALS AND THE FOOTWEAR OF PEACE

An army is only as good as the footwear the soldiers have. The old saying is true: “For the want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of the shoe the horse was lost, for want of the horse the rider was lost, for want of the rider the battle was lost, for want of the battle the war was lost: all for the want of a nail.”

Little things can be vital. Even sandals can make a difference.

Military footwear may seem mundane, but it is anything but mundane or common. The same was true in the Roman military as it is in modern warfare: soldiers can only fight where their feet will take them.



Roman military boots, or *caliga*, were rugged sandals with iron hobnails in their soles to reduce wear; they provided better traction and were even useful as weapons in tight circumstances. The 1/4 inch hobnails were conical and could be formidable weapons if the Roman soldier was locked in hand to hand and foot to foot combat. Vicious kicking was part of close up, intense fighting. Some Roman troops wore *greaves*, metal leg armor against kicking. If the Roman soldier was locked in wrestling, hand-to-hand combat with an enemy, one combat move was to run his foot sharply down the shin of his opponent. The advantage would shift immediately to the Roman as the hobnailed sandal shredded his opponent's leg.

Hobnails not only protected the sole of the sandal, but they were also the main constituent holding the inner and outer sole to the leather surrounding the foot. Stitching would wear out quickly. Hobnails, while needing replacement from time to time, would hold the sandal together. Look at the pattern below to see the intricate and ingenious design of Roman military *caliga*. One item of note is that when finished and worn, only the wide leather straps come in contact with the wearer's foot. There are no narrow leathers to cut or irritate the skin, yet the *caliga* can be laced tightly and give good support to the foot and ankle. Roman military sandals were not painful to wear. They were designed to protect the foot and the soldier.

Good footing, durability, and use as a weapon were all important, but one unique use of the sandals was to leave an unmistakable message on the ground for all to see. As a soldier walked across the dirt, sand or turf, the hobnails would leave an impression of the pattern on the sandal sole. One of the patterns (among many) used by first century Romans was that of a man kneeling, begging for mercy. The message was clear: “If you aren't a Roman you are dirt. If you want mercy from me, forget it - I'll walk on you!”

That was hardly what one would call a “politically correct” message of endearment to the locals, but it was within keeping of the iron fisted (and footed) Roman philosophy of ruling conquered peoples. It was a message of superiority, hate, and domination. The aim was to always impress the locals with the clear message that “Rome rules absolutely and will brook no challenges.” In modern terms we would call it a form of psychological warfare.

An interesting historical note is the story that as a young man, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germaicus (later known as Caligula, who became Emperor following the death of Tiberius) loved to wear military sandals – *caliga*. The name/term *caligula* is a diminutive of *caliga*. Essentially the name he is known by in history came from his nickname “little soldier's boots” or shortened to “boots.” Caligula lived up to his name and is known for

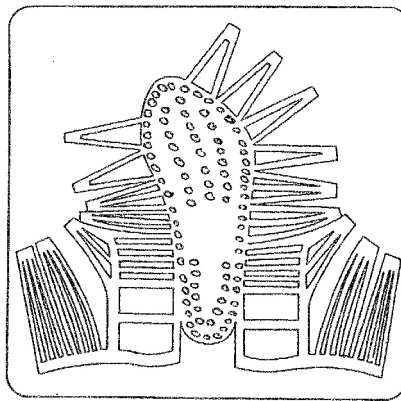
his excesses, sexual perversity, and abject cruelty.

Paul, and those who first read his letter to the Ephesians, had seen and understood the dominance of Rome and the message of hate their sandals left. He takes a known negative and turns it over 180 degrees with his words of instruction to have "...your feet fitted with...the gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15, NIV).

His reference and instruction is that the gospel makes a difference. It does not call for believers to walk on mercy, but to walk *in* and *with* mercy.

Key Roman Terms:

Caliga Roman hobnailed military boots/sandals



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