

# Claudius (Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus)

ALISDAIR GIBSON

Tiberius Claudius Germanicus (10 BCE–54 CE) was born on August 1 in LUGDUNUM (LYONS), the main city in Gallia Lugdunensis. His father was Nero Claudius Drusus, the brother of the future emperor TIBERIUS and a stepson of AUGUSTUS, and his mother was ANTONIA MINOR, the daughter of Mark Antony (see ANTONIUS, MARCUS (MARK ANTONY)). His siblings were the highly popular GERMANICUS, the father of Gaius (see CALIGULA), and Claudia Livilla, who would marry Tiberius' son Drusus Caesar. Traditionally, the sources portray him as a dribbling fool who became emperor only by a stroke of fortune, but there is a tension in the sources between this unsympathetic portrait of Claudius and the reports of his effective running of the empire.

The earliest source for Claudius is the openly hostile satire of SENECA THE YOUNGER, the *Apocolocyntosis*, performed two months after Claudius' death in 54 (Eden 1984: 1–23); another Neronian source is Calpurnius Siculus. The works of Flavian authors PLINY THE ELDER and Flavius JOSEPHUS survive, while those of Cluvius Rufus, Fabius Rusticus, and Servilius Nonianus do not. These, coupled with imperial biographies and the surviving oral tradition, would be used to some extent by SUETONIUS, TACITUS, CASSIUS DIO, the satirist JUVENAL, and the aforementioned Josephus. Unfortunately, Tacitus' *Annals* does not survive in its entirety, but the extant Books 11–12 cover part of Claudius' reign. In Dio's *Roman History*, part of the extant text relating to Claudius (Books 60–1) relies on the epitomes of ZONARAS and Xiphilinus.

The sources report on the poor health (Sen. *Apocol.* 3, 5–7; Suet. *Claud.* 30; Cass. Dio. 60.2–3) that plagued Claudius from childhood. There is a lively scholarly debate around



**Figure 1** Statue of Emperor Claudius in the guise of Jupiter. Vatican City, Rome. © Photo Scala, Florence.

potential illnesses. While the recent consensus among ancient historians has been to diagnose his illness as cerebral palsy, the medical profession has identified a range of pathologies, and there is a substantially revised contention that he had polio. The physical descriptions of Claudius contain some elements drawn from physiognomics, but a central characteristic, mercilessly parodied by the sources, is his vocal quality and stutter; Augustus' correspondence with Livia expressed his concerns and empathy at the situation (Suet. *Claud.* 4). Claudius' physical ailments comprised a complex amalgam as it constituted a limp, shaking head, febrile arm, stutter, saliva discharge, as well as the accusation of stupidity and folly. Seneca states that a man is either born a fool or a king and implies that Claudius is both. In a similar vein, the sources accuse Claudius of various character weaknesses, including



**Figure 2** Bronze inscription of Claudius' speech to the Senate in 48 CE concerning the three Gallic provinces and citizen rights. Musée gallo-romain de Fourvière, Lyon, France. © White Images/Scala, Florence.

cruelty, anger, gluttony, cowardice, and sexual covetousness.

In the years without formal office, Claudius had been a scholar and studied writing history under the supervision of LIVY. He was of a sufficient standard to write in Greek or Latin and produced twenty books on the Etruscans and eight books on Carthage, but overshadowed both with forty-one books on Augustus. His autobiography ran to a more modest eight books. Unfortunately, these are all lost, but some of Claudius' letters and speeches survive (Smallwood 1967). Claudius would remain an equestrian (knight) without significant public office until 37, when he was made suffect consul with Gaius. In the intervening years, he was an augur under Augustus and supervised the Festival of the *Salii*. The traditional scholarly presentation of his position as a Claudian outsider in the primarily

Julian imperial family does not bear close inspection. Claudius' inclusion in the *Tabula Siarensis* of 19, the *Senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre* a year later, and the compelling epigraphic evidence reassembled by Stuart and Rose (1990) on the inscriptions from the Porta Appia in Rome show that this was not the case. Claudius was also present alongside AGRIPPINA THE ELDER at the funeral of her husband Germanicus in 20 CE.

His unsuitability for high office became questionable when Claudius was appointed Gaius' colleague in the consulship of 37. Claudius was already respected by the equestrians and had earlier spoken to Gaius on behalf of the Senate. After the murder of Gaius on January 1, 41, the traditional account states that Claudius was discovered by a soldier in the palace and was taken to the Praetorian camp (see PRAETORIAN COHORTS) to be acclaimed

emperor (Joseph. *AJ* 19.1–273; Suet. *Claud.* 10; Cass. Dio. 60.1; Wiseman 1991). There were three conspiracies that combined to kill Gaius, led by Aemilius Regulus, Cassius Chaerea, and Annus Minucianus (Joseph. *AJ* 19.17–9), but to date Claudius has not been convincingly linked to any of them. He became Caesar and was granted the powers of the *princeps* by the Senate. However, the Senate would continue to resist him because they had discussed reverting to the republic and believed he had usurped power with the army's support.

The coin issues of the first year presented a political manifesto that would be markedly different from the principate that had gone immediately before. Connections to *divus* Augustus and his own immediate family, Drusus, Germanicus, and Antonia, were emphasized. Claudius used a new imperial mint to promote a series of ideas that lay outside the usual practice of simply honoring the *domus Augusta*. These included concepts of *libertas* (liberty) and a unique personal attribute of *Constantia* which, in the face of the absolutism of Gaius' reign, may mean "dependability" or "stability." *Pax* (peace) and *Victoria* (victory) placed Claudius as the inheritor of the Augustan policy of peace-through-victory (Sutherland 1951: 123–47). The now legendary *praetor recept* and *imper recept* issues are conventionally explained as the mutual greeting between a grateful emperor and the Praetorian Guard that signified Claudius' debt to the army. *De Germanis* displayed the relationship to his father, the military successes in Germany, and the resultant award of the name of Germanicus, all of which helped cement his legitimate place in the empire. The ratification of Claudius' powers by the Senate is recognized by *ex S.C. OB cives servatos*, while care for the people of Rome was demonstrated by the coin issue portraying the goddess CERES. This linked the building of the new harbor at OSTIA in 41/42 to securing the grain supply for the city and allowed imperial but humanitarian munificence through a grain dole controlled by Claudius' procurator. The policy of a pragmatic (and unflamboyant) public-building

program was continued by the construction and maintenance of aqueducts, while the new roads improved communications to the provinces. The coin series demonstrated a policy of centralization, placing Claudius as the essential symbol of power (Momigliano 1961; for a contrasting theory, see Levick 1990). However, the new principate also had to show in practical terms that the previous regime had been overturned, and the recall of exiles and the rescinding of Gaius' acts were another demonstration of this policy (Cass. Dio. 60.3–5).

Suetonius states that Claudius was modest and unassuming and refused excessive honors, but he did not wait for long, as the title *pater patriae* was accepted in 42 once he had accumulated enough goodwill. After the conquest of MAURETANIA, he accepted triumphal insignia (previously reserved for those outside the imperial family), yet after the German tribes were subdued in 41 he would accept the salutation *imperator* (going on to amass an excessive twenty-seven in all). Claudius' "Letter to Alexandrians" in 41 set out conditions to quell the violence between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria and affirm the rights and citizenship of both parties (see Joseph. *AJ* 19.279–85; see JEWS, IN ALEXANDRIA). However, Claudius refused to accept religious honors from Alexandria in the form of an imperial cult because that would demand a chief priest and temple. Neither of these would be in keeping with the desired appearance he wished to present at that time, which was that of a modest *princeps*.

Claudius was fearful for his life throughout a great part of his reign because he lacked political security from potential rivals. He would set about redressing this weakness. In 42, the conspiracy of L. Arruntius Scribonianus led to a short-lived revolt of the Dalmatian legions, and in 48 Claudius' third wife Valeria Messalina plotted with C. Silius to overthrow the emperor in a power struggle between disgruntled senators and the imperial freedmen under NARCISSUS and Pallas who foiled the plot (Tac. *Ann.* 11.26–8; Levick 1990: 63–7). Messalina is credited with undue

influence over Claudius, and many executions are attributed to her scheming. Seneca (*Apocol.* 13.5) uses the central speech of Augustus to accuse Claudius of killing the imperial family, but the other sources blame Messalina for the deaths of Claudius' niece Julia Livilla and her husband Drusus; Julia, the daughter of Tiberius' son Drusus; and Claudia Antonia's husband Pompeius Magnus (Tac. *Ann.* 13.32; Cass. Dio 60.8.5; Suet. *Claud.* 29.1). Messalina had been trying to secure the succession for her son Tiberius Claudius Britannicus, as she was wary of the threat to her position from AGRIPPINA THE YOUNGER (a daughter of Germanicus), who had her eye on putting her son L. Domitius Ahenobarbus (NERO) in place of Britannicus. Tacitus (*Ann.* 11.25) states that Claudius was driven to punish Messalina's debauchery (although sexual excesses are portrayed as political manipulation), but he then entered an incestuous union with his niece Agrippina. However, L. Vitellius and Pallas led the Senate to change the law which legalized this type of matrimony. Messalina planned to replace her aging husband with her paramour, the consul-elect Gaius Silius, who would then adopt and therefore protect Britannicus and the accession. They carried out a marriage ceremony when Claudius was in Ostia. Tacitus' version states that the freedmen were so worried about Messalina's powers of persuasion they shielded Claudius from her pleas. Messalina was executed under Narcissus' orders by the guards in the Gardens of Lucullus, and Silius did not survive the ensuing trial.

Claudius' failure to curb the intrigues of these powerful women was represented by the sources as a major weakness of his reign. He was previously married to Plautia Urganilla (the mother of (Nero Claudius) Drusus and Claudia) and Aelia Paetina (the mother of Claudia Antonia). Claudius planned to gain support by appointing client kings in Judaea and Armenia Minor and tried to marry off his immediate relatives to those of Augustus (such as Claudia Antonia with L. Iunius Torquatus Silanus), but these networks were not entirely successful. Silanus would be

executed as a potential assassin because of the sleight of hand of Messalina and Narcissus. A climate of fear and distrust was displayed by numerous purges, and the deaths of thirty-five senators and 321 equestrians included friends as well as those with imperial connections, as Claudius struggled to underpin his authority (Sen. *Apocol.* 11–14), but holding trials in private chambers, *intra cubiculum principis*, only increased the distrust of the emperor. Ironically, Claudius spent a great deal of time in the courts and, although he dispensed justice somewhat inconsistently on occasion, he was deeply interested in the law.

Although accused by some of antiquarianism, Claudius introduced several practical features. He invented three new letters of the alphabet because he thought the symbols for certain sounds were missing. In 47–8, he revived the office of censor after an interval of sixty-eight years. As censor, he regulated and categorized wealth, property, and moral behavior among the citizenry, and had those who no longer qualified for citizenship removed and punished (Suet. *Claud.* 16). The palace freedmen, including the inner circle of Narcissus, Pallas, Callistus, and Polybius, controlled access to the emperor and acted as advisers, which resulted in senatorial hostility to this powerful new class of men (*see* FREEDMEN AND FREEDWOMEN). Amassing fortunes by selling imperial offices and citizenship only compounded the resentment. Momigliano (1961: 39–73) argues against the proposition that these freedmen controlled the government, because in reality Claudius had designed this new administrative system. In 48, Claudius made a seminal speech to the Senate regarding the admission of the chiefs of the three Gallic provinces to the Senate (Smallwood 1967: no. 369; *see* GAUL (TRES GALLIAE)). The speech is recorded on a tablet discovered in 1528 on the slopes of Croix-Rousse near the site of the Federal Sanctuary of the Three Gauls in Lyons and is preserved in the Musée gallo-romain de Fourvière. Tacitus presents a heavily revised version of the speech as part of his account of the senatorial debate, but reports that the AEDUI

were the first to be admitted to the Senate (Tac. *Ann.* 11.24; Griffin 1982).

Following years in the political shadows, the evident lack of civil *auctoritas* (personal authority) and military *virtus* (courage) or *gloria* (honor) when Claudius came to power was overcome through his strategic repositioning. By way of respect for the Senate and political expediency, he abstained from multiple consulships, but was consul in 42, 43, 47, and 51, and allowed a second consulship to those who had showed merit but also had imperial connections – men such as M. Vinicius and Valerius Asiaticus. He restored and therefore legalized the election of magistrates, but they were closely monitored to eradicate the previous abuses of their position. Claudius abandoned the Augustan policy of maintaining the frontiers, and as a result the empire grew in size under his rule. Lycia–Pamphylia was made a Roman province in 43, Mauretania in 44, and Thrace was annexed in 46. The invasion and conquest of southern Britain in 43, where Claudius accepted the surrender of the tribal chiefs at Colchester (Cass. Dio 60.21.5), led to a triumph in Rome the following year. The victory was commemorated by triumphal arches in Gaul (near Boulogne) and Rome respectively, and their design is depicted on earlier *aurei* and *denarii* of 46/7 with the legend *De Britannis*. The death of Claudius' friend Herod Agrippa in 44 meant *JUDAEA* returned to being an imperial province. The new imperial provinces were distributed evenly among equestrian (*Judaea*, *Mauretania*, *Thrace*) and senatorial (*Britain*, *Lycia*) governors, and control of the provinces of *Achaia* and *Macedonia* was restored to the Senate, while *Commagene* was given to the client king Antiochos IV. Latterly, there were increased problems in the east when the Armenian client king was replaced in favor of the Parthians. In 47, Rome celebrated the eight hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the city at the *ludi saeculares* (Secular Games).

Claudius married Agrippina the Younger in 48, and adopted her son Nero in 50, thus

making him heir in front of the younger Britannicus. Nero was tutored by Seneca, who returned in 49 after eight years in exile, probably at Agrippina's behest, and he was visibly promoted ahead of Britannicus as the *princeps iuventutis*. Nero married Claudius' daughter Octavia in 53, which would finally stabilize Claudius' political position in Rome. However, the new PRAETORIAN PREFECT Sextus Afranius Burrus was Agrippina's nominee and this, coupled with a ready-made heir, loosened Claudius' grip on the principate. On October 13, 54 CE, he died at the age of sixty-four – according to the popular story after eating poisoned mushrooms (Suet. *Claud.* 44.2–3; Tac. *Ann.* 12.66–8; Cass. Dio. 60.34.2–3). The sources accuse Agrippina of arranging the murder, as it would certainly be in her interests to have Nero come to power, but it is not surprising that Claudius died at this time, having latterly suffered failing health. Nero's first political act after being presented to the Praetorians was to deify his father as *divus* Claudius.

The account of Claudius' life in Robert Graves' fictional *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, both published in 1934, has fixed his character firmly in the public imagination. Charles Laughton gave a memorable performance as Claudius in Alexander Korda's stillborn 1937 film of *I, Claudius*, and Derek Jacobi played him in the popular 1970s production for television.

SEE ALSO: *Britannia*, Roman Empire; *Caesar* (title); *Deformity*; *Germanicus' visit to Egypt*; *Historiography*, Greek and Roman; *Physiognomy*; *Rome*, city of : 4. *Julio-Claudian*.

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Eden, P. T., ed. (1984) *Seneca: Apocolocyntosis*. Cambridge.
- Griffin, M. T. (1982) "The Lyons tablet and Tacitean hindsight." *Classical Quarterly* 32: 404–18.
- Levick, B. (1990) *Claudius*. New Haven.
- Momigliano, A. (1961) *Claudius, the emperor and his achievement*, rev. ed., trans. W. D. Hogarth. Cambridge.

- Osgood, J. (2011) *Claudius Caesar: image and power in the early Roman Empire*. Cambridge.
- Rose, C. B. (1990) "The supposed Augustan arch at Pavia (Ticinum) and the Einsiedeln 326 manuscript." *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3: 163–9.
- Scramuzza, V. M. (1940) *The emperor Claudius*. Cambridge, MA.
- Smallwood, E. M. (1967) *Documents illustrating the principates of Gaius Claudius and Nero*. Cambridge.
- Sutherland, C. H. V. (1951) *Coinage in Roman imperial policy 31 BC–AD 68*. London.
- Sutherland, C. H. V. (1984) *The Roman imperial coinage*, vol. 1: *From 31 BC to AD 69*, rev. ed.: 121–32. London.
- Wiedemann, T. E. J. (1996) "Tiberius to Nero." In *Cambridge ancient history*, vol. 10: 198–255. 2nd ed. Cambridge.
- Wiseman, T. P., ed. and trans. (1991) *Flavius Josephus, Death of an emperor*. Exeter.