

Claudius' principate

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Claudius, a man generally not thought to be fit for public life by his family, came to the most important man in the Roman world by the accident of his survival. Together, the plotting of Livia, Sejanus, Tiberius, Gaius, and the events of life itself, had caused a shortage of male heirs in the imperial family, which, when Gaius was assassinated unexpectedly, left only his ageing uncle Claudius alive to follow him. His accession was the first of its kind in this dynasty, and legend has it that it started out quite against his will.

His stammer and his limp had made him distasteful to his mother, Antonia, the daughter of Octavia and wife of Livia's younger son Drusus, as well as to his grandmother. He was tucked away and married off. As usually happened with wealthy Romans who did not take their place in public life; he turned to scholarship. He wrote books on Carthaginian and Etruscan history and was one of the last to speak the Etruscan tongue. This makes him particularly sympathetic to the modern scholars, who often see in him one of their kind. This presumably also explains the interest in his person in modern literature¹.

The accepted modern view of Claudius is of an innovator, who centralised the powers of the emperor, both in Rome and in his person. Whether this is in relation to judicial powers, corn distribution, or the extension of the citizenship. He is also known to have begun the development of the particular brand of bureaucracy that later helped the empire grind to halt. Our sources depict him as a cruel man, who executed up to thirty-five senators, two hundred and twenty-one knights and many others, including

his own son-in-law. They depict him as a farcical weakling, who was manipulated by his wives and especially by his greedy freedmen.

However our sources, be that Tacitus or Suetonius or even the *Apocolocyntosis* thought to be written by Seneca, dwell most on his accession, his marital troubles with Valeria Messalina and the rise of Agrippina and Nero. Aside from a few derogatory comments in the *Apocolocyntosis* about the extension of citizenship to the whole known world, and presumably the missing parts of Tacitus concerning Claudius' early reign, his policies concern them very little. So how much of this centralisation was actually the result of a conscious policy on Claudius's part?

It can be argued that these measures were simply enacted to strengthen his own position, that they were merely reactions to the demands of the time. But would it not be odd that a man with such an intimate knowledge of history would not have a policy in mind, to carry out so long as his own existence and power were not endangered? Many scholars link Claudius with the phenomenon of the rise of the freedmen and also claim he was the first to organise them into departments or ministries within the court in order to create an administration.

Freedmen did have the opportunity to influence the emperor a great deal, not simply because they had access to him, but also because their skills were useful to him. Influential freedmen had often started as personal secretaries or scribes. Before his accession Claudius had clearly spent a lot of time alone with his slaves, as he was immersed in his writing and received

very few visitors. This would no doubt have placed his slaves in a place of trust.

Unlike his predecessors who had either had an important military career or else had been chosen as heir quite young, he was therefore unlikely to have formed strong bonds of trust with other army commanders or suitable ambitious young patricians and senators. These people would not have been in contact with Claudius and certainly not on a daily basis. The idea that some Claudius' freedmen were his friends does not sound that preposterous seen in this light. When he was elevated to Princeps, it seems logical that he should have taken his closest friends and confidantes with him.

Three of his closest freedmen in particular were famous in Antiquity. They are often described in the following way; Pallas, the chief financial officer, Narcissus, and Callistus, who carried out judicial duties. But we are also aware that his freedmen often advised him on issues unrelated with their "ministries", for example his choice of wife, after the downfall of Valeria Messalina. This would point towards the argument that they advised him on many issues, and that they did not stick to any particular capacity. No doubt Claudius, perhaps guided by his freedmen, reorganised the administration at court.

After all it had been neglected by his predecessor and by the prolonged absence of Tiberius before him. The Empire too was changing and its needs had to be met. Claudius was keen to represent himself as following in the footsteps of his ancestral Claudii and in those of a man he clearly admired; Julius Caesar. The resuscitated Fucine lake project clearly stems from that

source. His other great building schemes were created in reply to a necessity. The new Claudian aqueduct brought some badly needed fresh water into the city.

And the river harbour at Ostia was silting up; access to Rome by boat was only possible in the summer months, and even then with considerable difficulty. This had important consequences. Instead of attempting Ostia ships loaded with Egyptian grain headed for Rome tended to dock at Puteoli, then needing to be transported to the capital. Transport by land was not cost effective (and presumably more hassle than it was worth) and the stretch of sea up the Italian coast (not very well provided with harbours until Ostia and Portus) was rather treacherous.

The western ships, bringing corn from the western half of North Africa and Gaul, needed an easier (and closer than Puteoli) point of access. The set of canals and the new harbour Claudius undertook to build were certainly not unambitious or inexpensive. The underlying issue here is without a doubt corn. Claudius is attributed certain changes in the manner in which corn was distributed after its arrival at Ostia. Claudius is thought to have abolished the *praefecti frumenti dandi* and shifted the responsibility to the *praefectus annonae* and then placed one of his freedmen on the job in the field as "*curator Minuciae*".

But this is based solely on a gap in the epigraphical list of *praefecti frumenti dandi*, a list whose evidence could well just be lacking. That is the only hard evidence that we possess. When one looks closely at the first and last names on either side of the gap, it is soon clear that Claudius would have had to

take this step after 49AD, which begs the question of why it is not mentioned in either Tacitus or Cassius Dio. It also seems unlikely that Claudius would have abolished a college instituted by the senate in one snap of his fingers, this would have caused much more uproar in the sources had it occurred.

Some of Claudius' changes to the system of corn distribution we do have harder evidence for. The privileges he awarded the ship's captains and the start of insurance for ships against storm are clearly attested. The latter was particularly important as it allowed the ships to travel in winter when the weather was a more dangerous problem. He did reorganise the distribution of corn, once it reached the city, at the Portus Minucia, which enormously improved the whole system. It is unlikely that he created a curator Minuciae at first, and certainly not to replace the praefecti frumenti dandi, who operated from Ostia.

Claudius had realised, both from observing the reigns of his successors and from a threatening famine in the beginning of his own reign, the importance of having a large enough amount of corn in the city and of efficient ways in dispatching it. So Claudius definitely had a policy on corn. More of it was needed in Rome and its import should be made easier and swifter. Here he is very much in continuity with Augustus and even his other predecessors, all Roman politicians knew how important it was to keep the plebs happy with the corn dole.

So although Claudius' methods were known, they were merely aimed at making the system more efficient, not at giving him more power over it in a direct way. The judicial system in the administration of the empire centred

around the man who held supreme power. This was often lamented by the senate and by our sources, but it was not a Claudian innovation. Both Caesar and Augustus had been preoccupied with ensuring that law courts caught up with the backlog of private and public cases. Augustus often sat judging cases until nightfall and famously added thirty days, previously devoted to games, to the judicial calendar.

Again Claudius attempted to form a continuity with his predecessors and with men who held his admiration. He was a very enthusiastic judge and although he was criticised for not always following the guidelines of the law, he did have a set of values, or equity, that he attempted to find in his judgements. Suetonius tells the following story of his judgements: a mother was denying that the young man present was her son. Claudius ordered them to marry, which prompted the desperate mother to confess all and admit that he was in fact her son.

Whether or not this is true, after all Suetonius was born two years after the death of Claudius and would probably have found it difficult to check his sources, it does show us however that Claudius was an active juror. Some scholars link him with the age of jury duty going down from twenty-five to twenty-four, others claim Augustus was responsible for this. But all in all the law-courts increased in efficiency during Claudius' reign. Seneca, in his *Apocolocyntosis*, blames Claudius for having allowed every Greek, Gaul, Spaniard and Briton to wear the toga (i. e. to receive Roman citizenship).

Claudius of course famously annexed the province of Britannia, in an effort to form a military reputation for himself. He also never passed up

opportunities to keep the army on his good side. He gave men in the army the *privilegia maritorum*, which since they were not allowed to marry, did allow them to recognise their offspring. It is true that we find Claudius giving citizenship to a large amount of individuals and some entire towns. He also encouraged the provincial citizens to take part in the running of the state and in even in playing an active part in the senate.

A famous case is that of the Gauls of Comata in 48AD. Some attempt to link this wish to extend Roman citizenship to the provinces to Claudius' birth in Gaul has been made. On the other hand it seems much more likely that this policy was in reply to the legacies of Julius Caesar and Augustus. They too had been in favour of the "romanisation" of the provinces. By that mean the creation of all things that set Rome and her way of life aside from that of the locals; from the architecture to the social structure of life. Augustus had done a great deal to promote this.

During the reigns of Tiberius and Gaius this had been left to act on its own accord and in areas such as southern Gaul and Greece this process had changed the situation a great deal by the time Claudius became emperor. New steps were needed and Claudius saw this. The first step had been conquest, closely followed by colonisation, which involved the "imposition" of a Roman way of life. Giving the locals of these areas, who now, more than forty years on, very much lived like Romans, Roman citizenship was the obvious next step. As for those who had it, allowing them more of a say in the affairs of state was logical too.

Augustus had perhaps attempted to uphold the political supremacy of Italy, but with great generals like Galba or Vespasian on the scene, Claudius realised that this was no longer a viable option. His policy was aimed at a more equal status for the provinces. However when Claudius refuses to allow Alexandria a city council of its own, he is viewed almost as a tyrant, even though his reasons were perfectly viable and Augustus had done the same before him. Claudius could afford to be liberal with his gifts, but his own survival had to be assured first. Whether or not Claudius had a main policy is difficult to ascertain.

His policies however did not all point towards centralisation. Nor was he really a great innovator, most of his ideas were in some way started or thought up by either Julius Caesar or Augustus, even the invasion of Britannia had been previously attempted. The draining of the Fucine Lake was merely something Julius Caesar did not have the time to do himself before 44BC and even the reputation of attempting "centralisation" had previously been attached to Julius Caesar. However it has to be said for Claudius, he had a vision of the big picture, none of his innovations were particularly radical, but most of them had profound results in time.