

capital of ominous events taking place in Judaea itself, among the mixed Greek and Jewish population of Jamnia. The Jews of the town destroyed an altar the Greeks had set up in honour of the emperor, and this prompted Gaius to decree that the country's places of worship should all be converted into shrines of the imperial cult. So instructions were sent to Publius Petronius, the governor of Syria, to commission a statue of Gaius in the guise of Jupiter (Zeus) and to set it up in the Jerusalem temple. Although recognizing that this would lead to a national rebellion and mass-martyrdom, Petronius started to collect a legionary army to enforce the imperial order. Meanwhile Gaius was finally persuaded by his Jewish friend Julius Agrippa to cancel the command; and his assassination followed not long afterwards.

According to the biographer Suetonius, Gaius was very tall and extremely pale, with an unshapely body and very thin neck and legs. His eyes and temples were hollow, his forehead broad and grim, his hair thin and entirely gone from the top of his head, though his body was hairy. Because of his baldness and hairiness, he was said to have declared it a capital offence for anyone either to look down upon him as he passed in the street or to mention goats in any context. He worked hard to make his naturally forbidding features even more repulsive by practising grimaces in front of the mirror. He was passionately devoted to the circus and the stage (and enjoyed the riotous parties they involved), preoccupations which caused him to neglect state affairs to a damaging and perilous extent. The rumours about his sex life suggest startlingly versatile habits, including sadism, homosexuality and incestuous conduct with his sisters. Suetonius diagnosed a case of both physical and mental sickness, noting that the emperor suffered from acute insomnia, was sometimes scarcely able to move his limbs or think, and oscillated wildly between a confident love of vast crowds and a timid hankering after total solitude. He could also get extremely excited and angry. Philo believed that these troubles arose from the illness from which he suffered early in his reign as a result of over-indulgence. He has also been variously described as epileptic, schizoid, schizophrenic and a chronic alcoholic, and his system was said to have been ruined by an aphrodisiac given him by his last wife Caesonia. However, there is not sufficient evidence to enable any of these diagnoses to be accepted.

In spite of his unbalanced personality, Gaius evidently possessed considerable talents. It is true that his frantic energy was not matched by application or persistence; but his powers as an orator, for example, were impressive. His numerous epigrammatic utterances, too, showed a scathing and sceptical lucidity and realism, and his literary criticism displayed similar disconcerting qualities: Homer, Virgil and Livy all became victims of his venomous tongue. So did the philosopher Seneca the younger, described by Gaius as 'mere sand without lime' – who was able to retaliate after Gaius' death by depicting him in the worst possible light.



CLAUDIUS

41–54

CLAUDIUS (Tiberius Claudius Nero Germanicus) (41–54) was born at Lugdunum in 10 BC. He was the youngest son of Nero Drusus (the brother of TIBERIUS) and of Antonia the younger (daughter of the triumvir Marcus Antonius and Octavia). Handicapped by ill-health and alarming uncouthness, which seemed to signify a retarded mind, he received no public distinction from AUGUSTUS except an augurate, and held no official post under Tiberius. His nephew GAIUS, when he became emperor, gave him a consulship as his own colleague in AD 37 but otherwise treated him with disrespect.

After Gaius had been murdered, Claudius fled to an apartment of the palace and hid himself among the curtains of a balcony. But he was discovered by a praetorian guardsman and taken to the praetorian camp, where the men hailed him as emperor, apparently upon the initiative of the joint prefects of the guard, of whom one at least had taken a hand in the assassination of Gaius. At this juncture the senators were still deliberating about what should be done next: even the impracticable idea of restoring the Republic came under discussion. However, they soon fell in line with the praetorians' initiative and granted Claudius all the imperial powers – though he never ceased to resent their initial hesitation, and they for their part never forgave him for having taken the decision out of their hands. It was to be the first of many occasions on which their right to select a new occupant of the throne was brushed aside.

Claudius was also the first emperor to make the praetorian guardsmen a large gift when they proclaimed his accession, thus creating another ominous precedent for the future. Moreover, with a frankness which none of his successors ever equalled, he issued gold and silver coins pronouncing explicitly that it was to the guardsmen and their officers that he owed his throne. One of these series commemorated the oath of allegiance they had sworn him (*PRAETORiani RECEPti in fidem*), and another set of issues,

even more arrestingly, commemorated his initial entry into their camp (IMPERATOR RECEPUS). 'Imperator' had now come to mean 'emperor', although like his two immediate predecessors Claudius did not venture to imitate Augustus' use of the title as a special prefix to his personal name. Nevertheless, although he was entirely lacking in military experience the army was very ready to show him good will, since he was the brother of the popular Germanicus who died in AD 19 and whose name he incorporated in his own.

However the atmosphere was soured in 42 by an abortive revolt by the governor of Upper Illyricum (Dalmatia), Marcus Furius Camillus Scribonianus. Although the uprising was quelled before it even began, its instigators had possessed connexions with very influential noblemen in the capital. This shock frightened Claudius into adopting stringent security measures, and it was partly due to these that no success attended any of the six or more further conspiracies which were launched against him during the remaining twelve years of his reign. Their suppression reportedly cost the lives of thirty-five senators and between two and three hundred knights; so it was hardly surprising that the emperor's outward deference to the senate failed to make much impression on its members. On the contrary, his often expressed desire that it should act independently and responsibly fell on deaf ears – especially as he himself controlled its composition more tightly than any of his predecessors, reviving the ancient office of the censorship for this purpose, and holding it in person from 47–8.

As an immediate sequel to Scribonianus' attempted rebellion, Claudius decided to distract attention from these unpleasant happenings by an invasion and annexation of Britain, which Gaius had failed to carry out. Under the command of Aulus Plautius, between 43 and 47, southern and central England were overrun and became the Roman province of Britannia, with its frontier, the Fosse Way, extending from Lindum to a point near Isca Dumnoniorum. Claudius himself came to Britain for the decisive capture of Camulodunum, which had been the royal capital of the defeated Belgae. Meanwhile he had also annexed the two client kingdoms of Thrace, converting them into another new province. The territory became a valuable source for the recruitment of auxiliary troops, to whose terms of service Claudius was attentive. It is from his reign that we begin to find bronze 'diplomas' recording conferments of Roman citizenship upon auxiliaries demobilized after twenty-five years of service, and the grants were extended to their wives and sons as well. This practice may have been introduced by his predecessors, but Claudius did much to convert it into a regular system. He also greatly developed the career structure of military officers, holding out new and favourable opportunities for knights. Another of his achievements was the reorganization of the imperial fleet. In Italy the naval base of Puteoli was supplemented by the initiation of a great new harbour, Portus Augusti, at Ostia, and steps were also taken to establish flotillas in the harbours of Britain and Pontus.

Claudius refused to see the Empire as a predominantly Italian institution, showing a desire, for example, to fill vacancies in the senate not only from Italy and Romanized southern Gaul but also from other, less developed, regions of Gaul. A surviving inscription records a speech on this theme which he delivered to the senate. In this address, he anticipated the objection that he was advocating a revolutionary novelty by pointing out that innovations had always been a feature of the ever-evolving Roman State, and that the step he now suggested did not constitute a departure from tradition but its logical conclusion. 'You ask me,' he went on to say, 'is not an Italian senator preferable to a provincial? . . . I think that not even provincials ought to be excluded, provided that they can add distinction to the senate.' However, his speech, for all its broadmindedness, still made important concessions to Italian superiority; nor were the changes which actually emerged by any means sensational, since the number of non-Italian senators would remain quite small for some decades to come. Yet the emperor's modest suggestions aroused a storm of xenophobia and prompted many bitter jests about his alleged predilection for foreigners.

Claudius' dealings with non-Romans featured again in an edict relating to a problem which confronted him at the beginning of his reign. This was the violent, bloodthirsty and longstanding dispute between the Greeks and Jews of Alexandria (see GAIUS). Both parties sent him deputations immediately after his accession to the throne, and his replies included a strong and impartial admonition:

As for the question which party was responsible for the riots and feud (or rather, if the truth be told, the war) with the Jews. . . . I was unwilling to make a strict enquiry, though guarding within me a store of immutable indignation against whichever party renews the conflict; and I tell you once and for all that unless you put a stop to this ruinous and obstinate enmity against each other, I shall be driven to show what a benevolent *princeps* can be when turned to righteous indignation.

Meanwhile he himself concentrated heavily on the work that had to be done in the capital. In particular, he paid more attention to his judicial functions than any emperor had before. One of the differences between Roman rulers and the heads of modern governments is that the former were expected to serve regularly as judges, not only attending the tribunals that were under the auspices of the senate but also presiding over their own imperial law-court. Claudius performed both these tasks with great assiduity, devoting especial attention to his own court; for example, this court considered treason cases which his predecessors would often have remitted to the senate, so that the range of imperial jurisdiction became substantially increased. Senatorial resentment because of this development no doubt contributed to the rich crop of anecdotes suggesting that Claudius made an eccentric fool of himself as a judge. As a corrective to these tales, however, there is evidence that he

instituted valuable reforms in the judicial field, speeding up procedures, creating safeguards for the weak and defenceless, and displaying continual willingness to lay aside the letter of the law in order to preserve the spirit behind it. This was just one illustration of the immense industriousness he applied to his duties. A new imperial virtue is celebrated on the coins of his reign, right from the start: it is *CONSTANTIA AVGVSTI*, the emperor's perseverance.

Yet he could not do everything by himself: like other wearers of the purple, and with the same attendant dangers, he needed helpers. One of the most important of them, despite the distrust he inspired in senators as a whole, was drawn from their own ranks – Lucius Vitellius (father of the future emperor). Although not the son of a senator – his father was a knight from Luceria – he became the most adroit and adaptable politician of the epoch, receiving promotion under Tiberius and Gaius and attaining the rare distinction of a third consulate under Claudius, who also made him his colleague in the censorship. Yet the emperor's burden of work made it essential that he should have other confidential aides, and in consequence he greatly increased the powers and functions of some of his personal staff, of freedman status and mostly near-eastern in origin. Here, as so often, he was only systematizing an existent trend; but under his régime can be found three or four such figures enjoying exceptional and unprecedented influence. Hostile ancient writers, who loathed these non-senatorial orientals, show him feebly submitting to their outrageous whims, but until his last years – when his control over events did begin to weaken – he himself remained the source of all vital decisions. Nevertheless, the proximity of these freedmen to Claudius gave them extraordinary opportunities for patronage and wealth.

One such man was Polybius, the minister *a studiis*; that is to say, it was his duty to arrange for the appointment of the men whom the emperor had earmarked for jobs and promotions, so that his ante-room was thronged by powerful individuals. Callistus, the minister *a libellis* or 'of notes', recommended on petitions received from all over the Empire. But the most important of these state secretaries in the early part of the reign was Narcissus, the *ab epistulis* or minister of letters, who helped the emperor with his voluminous correspondence and knew all his secrets. It was he who in 48 took the necessary action when a crisis arose. It concerned Claudius' twenty-three-year-old third wife Valeria Messalina (grand-daughter of Augustus' sister Octavia), who had taken a rich and noble consul-designate, Gaius Silius (son of a famous general in Germany), as the last of a long line of lovers. While the emperor was away at the port of Ostia they attempted a *coup*, perhaps with the intention of placing the imperial couple's seven-year-old son Britannicus on the throne, with themselves as his regents. Claudius was befuddled by the emergency – perhaps this was the first time that he showed a serious loss of grip – but Narcissus moved decisively, arresting and executing Silius and driving

Messalina to suicide.

Yet paradoxically Narcissus' vigorous intervention accelerated his own eclipse, since the fourth wife whom Claudius proceeded to marry in 49, his niece Agrippina the younger (Julia Agrippina, daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina the elder), was the ally of a rival freedman Pallas. Pallas was the *a rationibus* or finance minister, to whom the senate voted flattering honours. Agrippina was named Augusta, an honour which no living wife of a living emperor had ever received before; and now that Claudius was her husband she had every intention that her twelve-year-old son by a former marriage, later known as *NERO*, should supplant Claudius' own son Britannicus as the heir to the throne. She duly arranged for Nero to be betrothed to Claudius' daughter Octavia, and a year later the emperor adopted him as his son.

Claudius died in October 54, in his sixty-fourth year. There were conflicting explanations of his death, but the version which secured the widest currency suggested that Agrippina had been his killer, apparently by feeding him with poisoned mushrooms. True, in Italy it is easy to die by choosing mushrooms badly; and it is not at first sight clear why Agrippina should need to take such a step, since her son Nero had manifestly become heir to the throne. But he was already seventeen years of age and perhaps his mother did not like to wait until he felt old enough to dispense with her services as regent.

Claudius, we are told by the biographer Suetonius, was completely heterosexual – a rare phenomenon among Roman rulers. He was tall and well built and had an impressive face and handsome white hair. However, he also stammered, slobbered, ran at the nose, suffered from a persistent nervous tic, and frequently ate and drank himself into a stupor. He slept badly at night, but during the daytime would often nod off while presiding over a lawsuit. Pliny the elder added that the corners of his eyes were covered by hoods of flesh, streaked with small veins and sometimes suffused with blood.

As a boy, he had been the despair of his grandmother Antonia; she described him as a monster whom nature had started work upon, but failed to complete. Later in life, his stomach-aches were so painful that they made him think of suicide – although otherwise his health had become better. All the same, there must have been something fundamentally wrong with him: his complaint has been variously diagnosed by historians as poliomyelitis, pre-natal encephalitis, multiple sclerosis and congenital cerebral paralysis. And paralysis it does seem to have been, of some sort or another, which had afflicted him in his earlier years with such a variety of conspicuous disabilities.

As to the gifts and defects of his character, they are hard to sum up, because senators' hostile feelings have dominated the tradition. Like Augustus, whom he greatly admired, Claudius tried to blend tradition with innovation. His own contribution to the blend was a disconcerting mixture of progressive broadmindedness and antiquarian pedantry. His mind was evidently seething with good ideas. But he found it difficult to coordinate them in a concisely

expressed form, and was easily thrown off-course by the suspicion, timidity and fear which were among his most conspicuous characteristics. However, what was most remarkable about Claudius, apart from peculiar appearance and behaviour, was a very high degree of erudition: Pliny the elder, himself phenomenally learned, numbered him among the hundred foremost scholarly writers of the day. In his youth Livy had seen him as a future historian; indeed, advised when young to abandon the delicate project of writing a history of recent Rome, he composed twenty books of Etruscan and eight of Carthaginian history and eight more of autobiographical memoirs – all lamentably lost. He also wrote a historical study of the Roman alphabet, to which he added three letters, though they were removed again shortly afterwards.

Claudius was married four times. His first wife, Plautia Urgulanilla, probably helped to inspire his interest in Etruscan history, since she was an Etruscan herself. After divorcing her he married Aelia Paetina for a short duration, before taking Valeria Messalina, aged fourteen, as his bride in 39, and the thirty-four-year-old Agrippina the younger ten years later.



NERO 54–68

NERO (54–68) was born at Antium in December 37, and at first was named Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. His father was Cnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, belonging to an extremely noble and ancient family, and his mother was the younger Agrippina, daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina the elder. When he had reached the age of two his mother was banished by GAIUS (Caligula), who seized his inheritance the following year after the death of the child's father.

Under CLAUDIUS, however, the younger Agrippina (his niece) was recalled from exile, and arranged for her son to receive a good education. After she had married the emperor Claudius in 49, the eminent Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the younger) became the tutor of the boy, who was betrothed to Claudius' daughter Octavia (he married her four years later). In 50, Agrippina persuaded her husband to adopt Nero as his son, so that

thenceforward he took precedence over Britannicus, the emperor's own younger son by the late Messalina; he now assumed the names of Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus. On the death of Claudius in October 54, Britannicus' claims were set aside, and, with the support of the praetorian prefect Sextus Afranius Burrus, Agrippina secured the throne for Nero.

Since he was not yet seventeen – far younger than any of his predecessors when they came to the throne – the empire was at first governed by Agrippina, the sister and wife of earlier emperors and now the mother of a third. This unprecedented phase of female rule was underlined by the initial monetary issue of the reign, which displayed the heads of Nero and Agrippina facing one another, with precedence accorded to Agrippina. When the imperial council (*consilium principis*) was in session, she used to listen, people said, behind a curtain; and she employed her power to eliminate possible rivals, notably Marcus Junius Silanus who, like Nero himself, was a great-great-grandson of AUGUSTUS.

But her dominant influence lasted only a very short time: already in 55 her son assumed priority over her on the coinage, and her name and portrait never appeared on any subsequent issue. When early in the same year Britannicus died at a dinner-party in the palace – allegedly murdered by Nero, although this could not be proved – Agrippina was said to have been dismayed, since she wanted to keep the youth in reserve in case her son became too recalcitrant. That remains conjectural; but her power was seen to be waning when the emperor transferred her to a separate residence, thus bringing her impressive Palatine receptions to an end.

The Empire now settled down to a period of sound government under the guidance of Seneca and Burrus. The late Claudius was deified (he was the first emperor since Augustus to receive this honour, which prompted some derogatory jokes), and Nero promised to employ his ancestor Augustus as his model. He also expressed a flattering, if somewhat unrealistic, desire that the senate and consuls should exercise their governmental functions as in ancient times. Steps were taken to improve public order, guard against forgery and reform treasury procedure; provincial governors and their staffs were forbidden to extract large sums of money from the local populations for their gladiatorial shows; and Nero himself, as he grew up, worked hard, particularly at his judicial duties, to which he contributed useful and practical procedural ideas.

He also entertained progressive, liberal feelings; these led him, for example, to try to abolish indirect taxes throughout the Empire (in response to complaints against tax-farmers), to abolish the stationing of praetorian guardsmen in circuses and theatres, and to forbid the killing of gladiators and condemned criminals in public spectacles. All these ideas proved impracticable, the first because it would have meant that direct taxation had to be greatly increased, the second because brawling in the arena soon became