Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus
In 41 A.D. the Roman Empire was in disarray. The sizable surplus that had been built up by the emperor Tiberius had been largely squandered by the emperor Gaius (Caligula). His ruthless four year rule revealed the major issues with a dynastic succession. Caligula was unstable, having grown up in the shadow of his great-uncle who was one of the many who had abused or neglected the former poster child of the Roman military. The people lived in fear as Caligula killed without thought or remorse. The day the Praetorian Guard killed him was a day of transition. Who would rule the Roman Empire? That question was soon answered. The Praetorian Guard, over the objection of the senate, selected the stumbling, bumbling uncle of the late emperor. The Praetorian Guard selected Claudius.

Claudius was born in 10 B.C. at Lugdunum in Gaul. Claudius was the grandson of the emperor Augustus, who had been ruling as princeps for 17 years now. Claudius was born into the heart of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. His older brother was the noble and dashing Germanicus. His nephew was the future tyrannical emperor Caligula. The son of his fourth wife would go on to become the emperor Nero. Claudius was truly immersed in the politics of a powerful Roman dynasty. And yet, through this all, he was largely ignored.

Claudius was born into a time in the world where strength, especially in men, was revered. Men represented the ruling class. They had the power in the ancient world. They were the soldiers, the statesmen, the aristocrats, the merchants. They needed full control of their physical and mental faculties. Those who were born different were born into a world that would discard them and push them to the side, holding them in the regards of a curious oddity at best and a miserable failure at the worst. Perhaps being noble saved Claudius some of the scathing that a normal Roman citizen would have received. Yet, he could not escape it all. Claudius was born with physical defects. He limped, he drooled and he stuttered. Claudius was frequently ill as a child, and as such was most likely not able to participate in many of the activities of a normal Roman boy of nobility. His physical weaknesses were soon linked to his mental state, at least by those close to him, and he was assumed to be mentally challenged and unstable. From the Roman historian Suetonius we are privied to the comments of his mother Antonia and his grandmother Livia. Both spoke very harshly of the young lad. It must have been very hurtful for the young Claudius to be treated so poorly by his mother and grandmother. His brother Germanicus was being groomed for the future of a leader, perhaps an emperor. He was being kept out of the publics eye. Claudius was viewed as an embarrassment by his family; they went so far as to place him under guard much as they would a woman. Even when Claudius became old enough for the affairs of a Roman statesman, he was isolated and sequestered by his family. Claudius was growing up in a powerful family; the family could not afford to show weakness to the Roman masses. The Roman emperors of this time were still frequently visiting the people and even attended rhetoric readings and debates held by Roman citizens. To put the face of Claudius on the family of the Julio-Claudians would have been embarrassing and perhaps even damaging politically. It seemed that everyone in his family was content and focused on isolating and hiding him; yet, it is interesting to note that Suetonius comments that although his mother and grandmother disdained him, his grandfather, the emperor Augustus, felt that there was more to this “idiot” than met the eye.
Due to his physical disabilities, Claudius spent his childhood in isolation. This did not stop him from receiving some of the official titles and duties that a Roman prince would have. Claudius participated in the normal rites of passage for a Roman prince. He assumed the *toga virilis*. However, all of this was done out of the eyes of the Roman populace. He never received an summons to public office. He never took command of a legion on the battlefield. He never engaged in political debate with the senate. It was considered too damaging to the family to do so. In an era were the public had much greater access to the Roman emperor and his family, the family needed to place its best foot forward. This left the young Claudius with a great deal of free time. This time was well spent. Claudius' mental abilities were not at all hindered by his physical state, as many thought, and he used his free time to read. And read he did. Claudius would read anything he could get his hands on. He was, apparently, the last person who could read Etruscan. He was a scholar of many fields and composed many works. He had a particular taste for history and for the liberal arts. As he read his knowledge of government and politics grew. He was, unknowingly, grooming himself for a future as the Roman emperor.

The problems with dynastic succession would become apparent after the death of Augustus in 14 A.D. The senate had fallen in love with the power and charm of Augustus. He was a politician of the highest caliber, worthy of inclusion into the ranks of history's greatest political masterminds. It was the Roman people's love of him and his great rule that allowed such a dynastic succession to proceed largely without incident. However, his choice for emperor was obviously not his first. His sons had died young. His appointed heirs had died young. When the dust settled on Augustus' poor family, all that remained was to name Tiberius his heir. Tiberius was a man of little charm and even less charisma. While he did the best job that he could in the role of the emperor, at least early on, he was never able to win the love and devotion of the senate. In an era where the senate still had a large amount of power, it was crucial for an emperor to have a good relationship with the Roman senate. Augustus knew how to do this. Tiberius did not, and his reign was mired by problems with the senate. But early on, there was a different problem. This problem would have a tremendous affect on the reigns of the next two emperors. One of them would be Claudius.

In the year 10 A.D. Tiberius adopted the young and dashing Germanicus as a son and heir-apparent. By then Tiberius was already in line to become the next emperor anyway; he wanted to secure an heir quickly. In the year 14 A.D., the emperor Augustus died. The senate appointed Germanicus as the commander of the forces in Germany, and succession to the imperial throne went to Tiberius. Upon the news of this, the soldiers in Germany immediately mutinied. The reasons were two-fold: terrible conditions for soldiers and the fact that an unpopular man was leading the great Roman empire. Germanicus put down the revolt peacefully, endearing him to the soldiers and the Roman populace. His military conquests took him to victories in Germany, subduing German tribes in the Battle of the Weser River in 16 A.D. It is interesting to note that he also discovered the fallen Roman legions, commanded by Quintillius Varus, during his campaigns. He soon was sent to Asia where he fought and won victories against Cappadocia and Commagena. His military successes and his popularity with the Roman people were growing each day. His youngest son, affectionately called Caligula, was the darling child of the Roman military. His family could be equated to the modern-day Kennedy family. They had
power and the devotion of the people. It was widely whispered that he would soon usurp power from the grumpy Tiberius and become emperor himself. Then, in 19 A.D., the fate of Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius would change drastically as Germanicus died in Antioch.

Although the death of Germanicus was never formally pinned on Tiberius, the fact that his popularity was growing and the governor of the area at the time Piso committed suicide leads one to believe that Tiberius had a hand in the death of his adopted son. The Roman people would think so too; from this day on Tiberius' paranoia would grow in leaps and bounds. In response to Agrippina's accusations, Tiberius had the widow put to death. The two oldest sons and two oldest daughters of the fallen soldier were also put to death in various ways. The age of Caligula and his sister Drucilla were what spared them from a similar fate. Claudius, then in his late twenties, had petitioned Tiberius for permission to hold public office. However, the emperor refused his requests, twice. Claudius tried hard to have an affect on the early Roman empire. But in a world where some of his views were considered radical and his physical handicaps were considered embarrassing and far too limiting, he was excluded at almost every turn.

The reign of Tiberius was marred by many things, not the least of which the rule of the brutal Sejanus. The Praetorian Prefect would seize almost full power after Tiberius had retreated to the island of Capri, away from the political intrigues of Rome. There he brought his grand-nephew Caligula to live with him, due in large part to keep him occupied. However, his great-uncle was reported to have abused him there, only hardening Caligula's pain and worsening his bitter past. How painful it must have been, to live with the man for whom all intents and purposes had murdered your father. When Sejanus' activities where finally brought to light, Tiberius was forced to return to Rome to deal with the situation. With Sejanus dead and the aging Tiberius in need of an heir, he chose the grand-nephew he had abused and mistreated. It is interesting to note that after the death of Drusus, Tiberius' son, some actually pushed for Claudius to become heir. However, the choice was Tiberius', and Caligula was his choice. This would lead to disaster for Rome.

Caligula assumed the throne in 37 A.D., and initially he seemed a perfect fit. The Roman people loved him, especially after the reign of the frugal and unhappy Tiberius and the terrors of Sejanus. However, soon a fever would claim Caligula's sanity and all hell would break loose. Caligula's reign of terror would sweep across the Roman empire for the four years he ruled. However, it was his rule which opened the door for Claudius. In July of 37 A.D., Caligula gave Claudius the office of Consul, the first public office of Claudius' life. However, this was done more for Caligula's benefit than for Claudius'. Caligula had a strange affection for his dotting uncle. He used Claudius as the butt of cruel jokes. He humiliated him before the senate. Despite holding public office, these actions forced Claudius to lead a private and reserved life, where he could. By 41 A.D., Claudius was thin, frail, and weak from years of abuse and torment by his nephew emperor. However, things would change drastically this year, and by years end it would be Claudius on the Roman throne.

Caligula was assassinated by the Praetorian Guard in the year 41 A.D. Following his death, an interesting series of events unfolds. Many are mired in speculation, but the result is the same: Claudius becomes emperor. A popular story tells us that the Praetorian Guard found him cowering behind some curtains in the
palace, fearing for his life. Instead, the Praetorian Guard informs him that he is the next emperor. This is probably more fictitious than anything else; what is the truth is that Claudius paid the Praetorian Guard a handsome donative for assisting him in the ascension to the imperial throne. This is probably one of the most important things Claudius ever did as emperor. This payment set a precedent that future emperors would almost always adhere to. When the real power slipped away from the senate and into the hands of the military, it was considered common practice for the new emperor, often a military commander from the provinces, to pay his troops a reward for their assistance in helping him become emperor. Those who did often found their reigns to be quieter, more peaceful, or at least less opposed by others. Those who did not, such as the elderly Pertinax, often would up dead. Claudius may have realized that the true power in Rome was hidden in the legions and not the halls of the senate. With the support of the Praetorian Guard, Claudius was recognized by the senate as the new emperor. The bumbling, stumbling, supposedly mentally-feeble man was now the leader of the most powerful empire in the world.

Claudius began his reign by trying to ensure that it would not end as his nephew's had. He pardoned nearly all the conspirators in the assassination of Caligula. However, to ensure that his position was not regarded as weak, he pursed and execute some of the major players in the scheme. This gave Claudius the presence of a powerful man who would retaliate with force if his family or the position of emperor was ever attacked. He tried to secure his position by instilling loyalty in the military. His donative gift to the Praetorian Guard was nothing entirely new; Augustus and Tiberius had both left gifts to the military in their wills. However, his issuance of coinage bearing members of the Praetorian Guard was an extra step in that direction. He clearly wanted to give the Praetorian Guard a feeling of comfort and power under his reign.

The Roman empire of the first century was a fast-growing and expanding empire. Augustus had added many territories; Caesar before him. While trade and commerce grew in the first century, the time period between the death of Augustus and the assassination of Caligula saw little actual expansion. The exploits of Germanicus during the period between 14 A.D. And 18 A.D. Saw the primary expansion of the Roman empire during that time frame. Tiberius was secluded and often paranoid; he did little to expand Rome beyond it's then present borders. Caligula seemed more concerned with games and festivals and squandering the treasury his great-uncle had worked so hard to save up. Claudius represents a shift back to the fundamental principles of the early Roman empire: a need for conquest and victory. Claudius added many territories during his reign; some of the more prominent included: Thrace, Pamphlyia, and Judea. However, the main conquest to which Claudius was known for was his conquest of Britain.

During the 1st century B.C., Caesar had claimed the island of Britain (or Britannia) for Rome. However, he was not able to muster a force to take the island, and Rome's claim to it was in word only. Claudius would take those words and use them in the conquest of the island nation, adding an important province to the Roman empire. In the year 43 Claudius sent Aulus Plautius, along with four legions, to the island nation in response to a call from a tribal ally there. There the Romans defeated the Britons in a decisive battle at Camulodunum (modern-day Colchester). By the year 50, the British general Caractacus was captured and the battle for Britain
had ended. The senate, recognizing this great achievement, granted to Claudius the title Britannicus. He only used the title with his son; he never officially took the title. This showed some of the humility of the emperor. In another move that may have shocked early Romans, he granted Caractacus clemency, allowing him to live out his days in Roman-controlled land. This was probably used more to pacify any remaining British resistance, but considering the Romans could have easily put it down, this move is still indicative of the nature of Claudius. He didn't use people in the ways his predecessors had. He saw through people to the real nature of the person, and how that person could best affect the affairs of Rome of the day.

In many ways Claudius would begin reforms that would start to shape the very fabric of the Roman empire. The empire at that time was still largely in the hands of the aristocrats (the Optimates). The fact that Claudius was even emperor was a slap in their faces. Here was a man, by and large in power because of the military, who was attempting to make some pretty sweeping reforms. He biggest, at least in the early part of his reign, was the use of freedmen in his “cabinet” of decision makers. Men like Narcissus were taking greater and greater roles in the affairs of governing Rome, displacing many of the old institutions that had previously been run by the noble aristocracy. Claudius, however, was able to see the benefits of using such men in such important positions. Slaves of the classical world were actually well-educated, refined individuals often charged with very important tasks. They were quite the disparity from the slaves of the modern world, who were almost always poor, badly educated (if at all), and typically of African descent. Claudius would recognize these abilities in men like Narcissus and put them to good use in the empire. As future emperors would take the throne, they would extend the policies of Claudius and appoint men from the Equestrian classes to help manage the affairs of the empire. Soon, even members of the Equestrian class would find themselves seated on the imperial throne.

Claudius helped build Rome into a greater power by embarking on an ambitious public works program. Rome was growing, as a census in the year 48 A.D. had shown, and as such the people needed a stronger infrastructure to handle these needs. To meet these concerns, he had two new aqueducts built during his reign, the *Aqua Claudia*, and the *Anio Novus*. To help facilitate transportation throughout the empire, Claudius began building roads and canals. He built a series of canals throughout the empire, including one from the Rhine to the sea and from Germany into Rome. Perhaps his most ambitious project was the construction of the port of Ostia. Grain was always a problem for Rome, as the Roman countryside was often filled with the fields of cash crops such as olives and grapes. While they can be used in fine goods, as a staple of the diet they are lacking. Therefore, Rome was forced to import much of its grain from Egypt. Grain importing had become cumbersome, and plans that date to the emperor Augustus called for a port at Ostia as a solution. Claudius realized the situation that could befall Rome, and dug out the plans for a solution.

While appealing to the general public, Claudius also realized that he needed to establish relations with the aristocracy, particularly the senate. The senate had never been pleased with the way he ascended to the throne, and as a result harbored some resentment to him. In an attempt to make them feel more at ease, he would sit among them. He spoke in turn, and spurned titles like imperator, preferring to achieve the titles through
meritorious action instead. He even returned control of some Roman provinces to the senate. Claudius' efforts here show just how much power and influence the senate has during this time period. As the centuries would pass, the senate's power would ebb away, taken by powerful emperors who came to realize that the real power behind Rome lay in the provinces and the legions, not a collection of elderly men in a building in a far away city. Still, during this period the senate had power, and Claudius is doing what he can to see to it that they favor and support him. Despite his efforts, many in the senate still despised him. There were plots against his life even. Claudius, somewhat disheartened, realized that he needed to strip some of the senatorial power away as to prevent them from doing anything that could jeopardize his position. This would result in several coup attempts. None were successful; many senators were put to death because of them. In the end, Claudius' attempts to make peace with the senate found mixed results, and in the end he began to realize what his successors would put into action: the senate's power must be stripped in favor of a stronger military and a more powerful emperor.

The religious nature of the Roman world at the time of Claudius was a pagan one. The budding Christian religion was spreading quickly, but was still small. Jews were located largely in Judea. The pagan gods that were prevalent in Rome at the time seemed to coexist in a kind of odd harmony. One could pay homage to the traditional Roman pantheon of gods, or they could belong to one of the many sects and cults of the day. Worship of gods like Isis and Mithra were common place; still the Roman pantheon remained supreme in Rome. Claudius added weight to these issues by incorporating religious reforms into his policy. He restored lost days to festivals, removed extraneous festivals created by Caligula, and re instituted old observances and languages. He defended the state religion, expelling foreign astrologers and giving more weight to Roman soothsayers. He expelled Jews from Rome, largely due to the unrest that Christians were causing in the Jewish community.

Despite his many successes in administration and on the battlefield, his personal life was a myriad of pain and uncertainty that would eventually have a hand in his death. His love life was noted for being extremely unusual for the day. Suetonius noted that his love was for women only; he had no taste for men. This was unusual because often Roman upper-class men would take young boys as lovers in addition to their wives, perhaps subscribing to the Greek philosophy that a woman is for bearing children, a man is to truly share your love with. Claudius did not subscribe to this philosophy at all. Claudius was married for times. His first was to a woman named Plautia Urgulanilla. She bore him a son, Claudius Drusus, who would die of asphyxiation during his teenage years. He would divorce her because of her adulterous and murderous activities. His second marriage was to Aelia Paetina. He would divorce her once the marriage became politically unstable. However, he may also have divorced her because of her abusive personality. His third marriage was to the adulterous Valeria Messalina. She would bear him the son who would carry the title Britannicus, born shortly after he ascended to the throne (but obviously not yet named Britannicus since he had not yet been awarded the title). This marriage would be destructive and damaging to the emperor. His wife was adulterous to say the least; a story was circulated that she once challenged a prostitute to a contest concerning how many men they could sleep with in a 24-hour period, and she won. The marriage would end when she married her lover Silius in the
palace while Claudius was away. When he caught wind of this, his freedmen, lead by Narcissus, would kill Silius, Messalina, and those affiliated with the marriage. While he vowed never to marry again, he would change his mind and wed for the fourth and final time. His fourth marriage was probably political; his son Britannicus was too young to be an heir, and Agrippina the Younger had a son of age would could be an heir. He wed her, made Nero a joint heir, and wed him to his daughter Octavia. This marriage would give Rome its next emperor, as Agrippina had plans for the demise of Claudius.

Claudius’ personal life gives us an interesting view into the family life of an Augustan emperor. Augustus’ ideal family was the marriage between a man and a woman, a lot of children, and a happy home. Adultery was outlawed under Augustus, single men and widowed women were required to marry, and strict standards were set up. It’s interesting to note just how skewed this is in the family of Claudius. He is married for times; he divorces one wife because of adultery, another because of political weakness and abuse, and watches as his third wife is murdered for adultery and scheming to overthrow him. His fourth wife would be implicated in his eventual demise. Many Romans must’ve had to deal with the intricacies of marriage and the family. Claudius had to deal with that, as well as the management of an empire. Where he succeeded on the battlefield, in the senate halls, and in the general administration of the empire, he failed in the bedchamber. Unfortunately for him, it would be that failure that would spark his doom.

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus died in October of 54 A.D. His death was attributed to poison, most likely in the mushrooms he ate. While there were a few people close to him that could have accomplished the dastardly task, all signs pointed to Agrippina the Younger. With Britannicus approaching the age of majority, there was no longer any need for Nero as a joint heir. This would have put her son’s position in great jeopardy, even leading to a potential divorce. Agrippina the Younger took steps to ensure that this did not happen. Claudius was deified by the senate almost immediately thereafter, just the second emperor (Augustus) to be deified by the Roman senate and the last of the Julio-Claudians to be deified. This action shows that the respect and admiration for Claudius persisted even in the senate. Nero would come to power jointly with Britannicus, but it would not be long before he would murder the young man. He would even murder his own mother, who had been primarily responsible in bringing her son to power. Nero would represent a new, tyrannical regime. He would be the last of the Julio-Claudiens to rule.

Claudius’ reign as emperor of Rome lasted from 41 A.D. to 54 A.D. During that time, he completely shocked those who knew him by demonstrating his abilities as a dynamic leader and an effective administrator. In a Rome hungry for expansion, for wealth and power, he gave it to them. He rescinded taxes that were draining the wealth of the citizens. He added new territories to the empire. He built temples and roads, canals and aqueducts. His reign showed that despite physical ailments and opposition from the aristocracy, one could have great success in managing the affairs of Rome. Where Claudius failed was in his personal life. His wives mistreated him. They cuckolded him. They abused him. And he took it all, sometimes not acting until it was almost too late. In the end, it would be a woman who would bring down the most powerful man in the world.
Bibliography


