

VI.—The *Imbecillitas* of the Emperor Claudius

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A study of the physical handicaps which the historians ascribe to Claudius indicates, in the light of modern medicine, that he was a victim of cerebral palsy. Since this condition was not understood by the ancients and his defects were resented by the royal family, he was subjected to a despised and neglected childhood and youth. To compensate for this situation, though he undoubtedly possessed a good mind, he chose associates and developed habits which were looked on with disdain and held up to ridicule by his contemporaries and have been recorded in an unfavorable light by historians.

There was some abnormality about the Emperor Claudius which kept him in the background until, at the age of fifty, he became emperor on the death of his nephew, Caligula. This handicap is referred to in the biography by Suetonius, in the accounts of his reign by Tacitus and Cassius Dio, by Aurelius Victor, and in the satire, the *Apocolocyntosis*, by his contemporary, Seneca.¹ Yet, in spite of the derision in which he was held, according to these writers, the historical account, as well as the evidence of inscriptions and of recently discovered papyri, shows that he had a mind unquestionably above average.² In his adult life, at least, his personality also was not unpleasing.

Modern writers seem to have been influenced to some extent by the derivatives in English and the Romance languages of the word *imbecillitas*,³ a term which Suetonius applies to Claudius (6.2). The suggested causes of his handicap, ranging from hereditary insanity or epilepsy to some slight nervous ailment, are summarized by Scramuzza.⁴ It is the object of the present study to re-evaluate the ancient evidence in order to determine Claudius' disability in the light of current medical knowledge and practice in the rehabili-

¹ Suet. *Claud.* 2-4, 30; Tac. *Ann.* 6.46; Dio 60.2; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 3.17; Sen. *Apoc.* 5.2.

² Arnaldo Momigliano, *Claudius the Emperor and His Achievement* (Oxford, 1934) xi; Vincent M. Scramuzza, *The Emperor Claudius* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940) 64 ff., where the Alexandrian papyrus is quoted and discussed, and 99 ff. on the Lyons inscription.

³ E.g., Guglielmo Ferrero, *The Greatness and Decline of Rome*, trans. by Rev. H. J. Chaytor (New York, 1909) 5.304.

⁴ Scramuzza, *op. cit.* 238, note 3.

tation of the handicapped, and to show how some of the faults censured by his contemporaries were basically the result of early social maladjustment.

To review his ancestry, Claudius was the child of the elder Drusus and Antonia Minor. His father was the younger of the two sons of Livia and her first husband, Tiberius Claudius Nero. His mother was the daughter of Octavia, Augustus' sister, and of Mark Antony. Drusus and Antonia were the parents of Germanicus, Livia Drusilla, several children who died at birth or in early childhood, and lastly of Claudius (Suet. 1.6). Their youngest child, Claudius, was born at Lugdunum (Lyons). In the following year his father, Drusus, while campaigning with the armies on the Rhine with headquarters at Mogontiacum (Mainz), died a month after he fell from his horse, an accident which had probably caused internal injuries.⁵

We do not know whether Claudius accompanied the family to Germany or was left at Rome. There is no reason to assume that the nervous system of the infant Claudius was affected by the trip from Lyons to Rome or even to Mainz, if his family did accompany Drusus on his last expedition. A baby, in the arms of a nurse, as was until recently the continental method of transporting an infant, was not more affected by travel than the modern American child sleeping peacefully in a bassinet in the family car. Since his maternal grandmother, Octavia, had died the year before his birth (Dio 54.35.4), Claudius may have become a member of his grandmother Livia's household at a very early age. One infant more or less made little difference in a ménage with a vast number of slaves. Under normal conditions, the circumstances of birth in a province would have caused no handicap to the child of a Roman aristocrat. His provincial villa was as comfortable as his home in Rome. The niece and daughter-in-law of Augustus doubtless had the best of obstetrical care available at the time. The fact that Antonia had lost several children would, however, indicate that she had some difficulty at childbirth. The epigram preserved in the *Anthologia Palatina* (6.244), which prays for a safe delivery for Antonia, does not necessarily indicate that any such weakness on her part was well known. It is merely a conventional wish for the welfare of Antonia and her expected child. It must refer to a child older than Claudius, since it mentions Antonia's mother, Octavia, as still living.

⁵ Suet. *Claud.* 2.1; Liv. *Periocha* 142.

Antonia herself, born in 36 B.C., lived to be well over seventy, dying in the reign of her grandson, Caligula, who became emperor A.D. 37. She must therefore have had a fairly rugged constitution. Though poison or forced suicide was given as the cause of her death in the gossip of the court, it was also said that she died of disappointment due to the slights which she had received from Caligula.⁶ Thus there may have been psychosomatic causes which hastened her death. Other existing references to Antonia allude principally to her health. Scribonius Largus (271) gives a prescription for a salve used by her to prevent or cure muscular pains and stiffness of limbs. She had suffered from some disorder of vision and was the victim of xerostomia.⁷ The last two conditions are normally due to glandular ailments or aggravated by neuroses. A neurotic woman, or one afflicted with disorders of glandular functions, would be more likely to develop complications in childbearing. The large head of Claudius, so recognizable in his portraits as an adult, might have been a contributory factor to an injury at his birth.⁸

Suetonius has given us some account of Claudius' childhood. His own mother, the daughter of Mark Antony, had no sympathy for her son's defects. She referred to him as a monster, an unformed creature, and when anyone was inept (*socors*), she said he was more stupid than her son Claudius (Suet. 3.2). Livia, his paternal grandmother, was evidently the type of person that is repelled by physical handicaps. She despised and avoided the boy, spoke to him as little as possible, gave him instructions in short, harsh notes or by messengers, even in the palace (Suet. 3.2). In view of the eminence of the Julio-Claudians and the handsome appearance of most of them, we can readily understand how a less highly endowed scion would have been treated with aversion and regarded as something to be concealed from public view, lest, as Augustus feared, he might bring ridicule on the family (Suet. 4.1-4). Accordingly, we may interpret the report that Claudius suffered from fevers (Sen. *Apoc.* 6.1) as the excuse given for his non-appearance when occasion would have demanded his presence. Similar excuses are still made by families to explain the absence of afflicted members from social gatherings. When the young Claudius did have to appear in public,

⁶ Dio 59.3.6; Suet. *Gaius* 23.2.

⁷ Galen 12.768-769 K.; Pliny *N.H.* 7.80.

⁸ This was called to my attention by Dr. J. Edward Johnson of the University of Texas Health Service, to whom I am indebted for checking the medical data in this paper.

he wore a voluminous cloak to conceal his jerky movements (Suet. 2.2).

Augustus discussed the problem in letters to Livia, quoted by Suetonius and obviously written on occasions when one or the other was absent from Rome.⁹ In his ignorance of the basic physiological and psychological reasons for the behavior of Claudius, he blamed it on the boy's carelessness and indolence. He suggested that his grandson model his bearing and gait on some suitable person (Suet. 4.5). In all probability, he chose the tutor about whom Suetonius (2.2), quoting from a book by Claudius himself, says that he was a barbarian and a former officer in charge of a brigade of mule drivers. Augustus had probably secured as a tutor an ex-drill-sergeant, who had assured him that he could make any boy behave, however intractable.

Claudius did, fortunately, receive sympathy and help from some members of the imperial household, as I shall record in another connection. Being unable to engage in any athletic sports, he devoted his time from an early period to research and writing and compiled antiquarian information (Suet. 41, 42), the loss of which is to be regretted.

The peculiar mannerisms of Claudius which Augustus censured were his awkward hands, shambling gait, and stumbling speech. His nodding head and his drooling are also mentioned by Suetonius (4, 30). These defects are bitterly satirized in the *Apocolocyntosis* (5.2). Such a combination of infirmities is frequently found in victims of congenital cerebral palsy,¹⁰ all types of which were until recently classed as spasticity. To quote from a medical article:¹¹

Cerebral palsy is an abnormality of muscle behavior caused by damage or malformation of the brain centers that govern muscular

⁹ Suet. 4.5: dum tu (i.e. Livia) aberis.

¹⁰ The symptoms were recognized and discussed by T. DeC. Ruth, *The Problem of Claudius* (Johns Hopkins Diss., 1916). He conjectured (18) that Claudius' birth was premature and that this circumstance resulted in an injury to the neonate. This was not necessarily the case. The trouble may occur before, after, or during birth, the last of which seems more likely in the case of Claudius from Antonia's medical history. A premature baby, born without complications, reaches the development of a full-time infant before the end of its second year. Moreover, Ruth refers to the ailment in just one instance (131) as "infantile spastic paralysis," an abnormality now described as cerebral palsy, which is of several types. The term "infantile paralysis," used of Claudius in *CAH* 10.667, is at present synonymous with poliomyelitis, a crippling disease resulting from an infection.

¹¹ T. Arthur Turner in *Hygeia* 25 (1947) 778.

control. . . . The muscular trouble may be of various kinds. . . . The child may suffer from random involuntary movements. In addition to the muscular difficulties of arms and legs the child may have defects of speech. . . . Damage to the tissue of the brain cannot be repaired. The wires are permanently down.

In another article we find the following:¹²

Except for inevitable retardation due to difficulties of expression, it is only the nature and extent of the brain damage that would make the child any duller than he would be otherwise. The chances are that a child born to unusually intelligent parents will be somewhat above the average provided that the brain centers governing intelligence escape damage.

Since Claudius was descended from the Claudii on one side and the Julii and Antonii on the other, his chance of inheriting mental ability above the average under normal conditions was high. With his physical handicap from birth, he took a longer time to mature socially than he would have otherwise.¹³

His stammering speech was overcome when he read from manuscript or declaimed from memory (Suet. 4.6; Tac. *Ann.* 13.3). He introduced the innovation of sitting when he addressed the senate (Dio 60.2), so that he could concentrate on the reading alone and would not have to counteract any tendency to sway when standing. Under the stress of excitement, nervous strain made his difficulties more apparent. His conduct when the carefully planned spectacle at the draining of the Fucine Lake appeared to be a failure made him the butt for the ridicule of historians (Suet. 21.6). On that occasion his disappointment caused him to lose his carefully acquired habits of muscular control. His walk along the shore of the lake degenerated into the jerky gait of his childhood. This characteristic, uneven walk of the cerebral palsied child is due to the fact that the nerves which control the foot muscles are slow in functioning. The child does not begin to walk at the usual time. The Achilles tendon, which governs the foot, does not expand normally, but remains somewhat shortened,¹⁴ so that there is an effort to put the heel down first in stepping along. Claudius' awkwardness in

¹² Winthrop M. Phelps and T. Arthur Turner in *Hygeia* 26 (1948) 272.

¹³ The bloodshot appearance of Claudius' eyes, mentioned by Pliny, *N.H.* 11.144, had no relation whatever to the brain injury, but is a condition due to some unrelated cause.

¹⁴ Phelps and Turner in *Hygeia* 26 (1948) 228.

entering a banquet hall (Suet. 8) may be attributed to a return to the uncontrolled walk of his childhood because of embarrassment.

Some peculiarities of Claudius' character which are criticized or ridiculed by his biographers may be readily understood when considered from the point of view of his physical handicaps and the treatment which he received because of them from his family and social equals. Snubbed, avoided, and made the victim of practical jokes by his own family and their circle, he sought human companionship among other groups. His enunciation of Latin, uncouth to Augustus, would not have jarred on those to whom Latin was a foreign tongue or those less concerned with careful speech. Thus, at court, Claudius' friend was the Jewish hostage, Prince Agrippa,¹⁵ and others, some obviously of Greek extraction (Suet. 4.5). Doubtless also his interest in people and a craving for companionship led him to wander among the *trattorie*, presumably those of the Subura and out in the Campagna (Suet. 40.1). Here his ability to pay the score must have added to his popularity. He had also acquired a good-natured camaraderie. He was of agreeable appearance when at ease (Suet. 30; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 3.17), as are many handicapped individuals. It may be observed also that less privileged persons, except those who have become brutalized as a result of their own feeling of inferiority, are often more tolerant of the handicapped than are the more fortunate.

The existing representations of Claudius, all portrait busts or cameos made in his later years when emperor, show a not unattractive person. He displays a marked resemblance to his uncle, Tiberius; Claudius, however, had a broader skull. A straining of the forehead muscles about the eyes, seen on all the portraits, shows the look of one habitually on guard against a *faux pas*, in contrast to the calm brow of Tiberius.¹⁶ The thickening of the muscles of the throat, interpreted by Baring-Gould as caused by swollen glands,¹⁷ may have developed from that conscious effort to hold his head erect and avoid the trembling motion.

Suetonius and Seneca both censure Claudius for his excessive devotion to gambling with dice. Granted that gambling was a

¹⁵ Vid. especially Josephus *Ant.* 19.4, 5. Claudius' relation to Agrippa is discussed at length by Scramuzza, *op. cit.* (above, note 2) 12 ff., 57 ff.

¹⁶ Eugénie Strong, *Art in Ancient Rome* (New York, 1928) 1.190, rightly describes this as due to "fussiness and worry."

¹⁷ *The Tragedy of the Caesars* (London, 1923) 467.

common vice of the time, the fact that writers commented on Claudius' addiction to this pastime shows that he carried it to extremes, for, as a rule, only the unusual is commented on by reporters. It is now recognized that children, unless guided, tend to follow the patterns of life around them without discrimination.¹⁸ Probably both the fact that Claudius was left much to himself and that he was unable to oppose his thumb to the other fingers, as is the case with many victims of cerebral palsy, encouraged him to practice with the dice cup by using his other fingers and thus to become the equal of normal players. The current practice of occupational therapy in the rehabilitation of handicapped persons is to train the individual so that other muscles may take over the duties ordinarily performed by the injured areas. Claudius' gambling may have developed from a form of occupational therapy rather than the pursuit of a vice.

The pleasures of eating, popular with the Romans of the upper class, were also enjoyed by Claudius to a reprehensible degree. Overeating is an acknowledged form of satisfaction which compensates for social maladjustment or unhappiness in cases not caused by glandular imbalance. Accordingly, because of his early social isolation, Claudius had recourse to overeating as a compensation and continued to indulge in this habit even after he became emperor. The jesters of the court of Caligula had taken advantage of this tendency of Claudius to "eat himself to sleep" and made a fool of him. The fact that severe indigestion frequently followed his gorging did not deter him (Suet. 33.1; 8; 31).

Claudius' succession of marriages, also, must be considered in relation to his ostracism in childhood. He was anxious to be regarded as a normal member of society. Suetonius admits, however, that he was free from unnatural vice (33.2). As no high-minded Roman woman was attracted to Claudius for his better qualities or through a desire to help him as an individual, the glamour and the assured income of the imperial family were what must have persuaded ambitious parents or the worldly type of woman to be party to a matrimonial alliance with him. Claudius' four wives, though of noble ancestry, were all ignoble in character. The least objectionable of these was Aelia Paetina, but the *levia offensa* for

¹⁸ Elizabeth B. Hurlock, *Child Development* (New York and London, 1942) 398.

which he divorced her (Suet. 26.2) were probably the equivalent of the "mental cruelty" which is often charged in a modern court.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss Claudius as a public figure, but we must take into consideration such aspects of his conduct in public as evidently developed from the circumstances of his early life. Having been kept in the background for so long a time, he desired to have his hand in everything when he became emperor.¹⁹ Thus he presided at trials in person and enjoyed coming upon a scene unannounced.²⁰ His introduction of the custom of deputizing important matters to freedmen may have sprung from the time when he was put aside by equals but treated kindly by inferiors. He supported the candidacy of the son of a palace freedman who had once given him a drink when he was ill. He rewarded a ladies' maid because she had always treated him with respect (Suet. 40.2).

We cannot evaluate Claudius' capacity as a judge solely on the basis of the few decisions which have been held up to ridicule by his detractors.²¹ The evidence of history, however, shows that he was an able and conscientious administrator. As he himself declared, he had pretended stupidity.²² He may thus be regarded as resembling the elder Brutus, that is, gold covered by horn. The physical drawbacks described by the historians, his slow development, his peculiar walk, his drooling, stumbling speech, shaking head, and helpless hands indicate that he was the victim of congenital cerebral palsy. This injury was not recognized prior to the modern study of anatomy and our microscopic and X-ray techniques. Claudius' personality defects, ridiculed by his contemporaries, were the result of this handicap and were hardly understandable before modern psychological studies in social adjustment.

¹⁹ Cf. Arthur T. Jersild, *Child Psychology* (New York, 1946) 547.

²⁰ Suet. 12.2, 15, 16; Sen. *Apoc.* 7.4 f.; Pliny *Epist.* 1.13.3.

²¹ Of his decisions which have been reported as absurd by ancient historians eager to depreciate him, the one in which he commanded a woman to marry a young man whom she disclaimed as her son and, on her refusal, gave a verdict upholding the relationship alleged by the plaintiff (Suet. 15.2) may be compared with that judgment of Solomon which all of us learned in Sunday school as the profound example of the latter's wisdom.

²² Suet. 38.3; Dio 60.2.4. Cf. Augustus' admission to his "nobility" of character (Suet. 4.5).