

The Cult of Claudius: Scope and Survival

Main theme: this essay examines whether the Cult of Divus Claudius was given the same degree of legitimacy as Augustus' and its survival under Nero, the Flavians, and the Five Good Emperors.

As we discussed in class, Claudius was surrounded by the imperial cult from childhood, and this connection may have been considered as proof of his own divinity by the time of Suetonius. Under Tiberius, Claudius served as a member of the Augustan priesthood and, according to Suetonius, had to pay a fee for entering Gaius' new priesthood. After ascending the throne, he personally intervened in the cult – he prevented the dishonouring of Gaius and was willing to reverse the decisions of previous emperors to confer divine honours on Julio-Claudians. So, he deified Livia against her own wishes, which points to a personal policy of aggrandizing his family by means of divine honours.

Claudius was reluctant about applying the imperial cult to himself and did not accept excessive honours. He rejected the status of a living god and forbade anyone to worship him or offer him any sacrifice. Nevertheless, worship of Claudius as a living god seems to have occurred in the Greek East, which is reflected by a temple at Cos, and “a head of Claudius” in a temple dedicated to Athena in Priene. Evidently Claudius was unable, and probably also unwilling, to tightly control the imperial cult over the expanse of the empire.

From a Roman perspective the cult of Claudius began at his death on the 13th October, 54 AD. There was, however, a tension within the cult between respect and outright mockery. First, there is evidence of seriousness in the establishment of the cult, especially in the funeral, where Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Tacitus mention the honours given to him on the same scale as those of Augustus. Tacitus writes that Agrippina was an active participant in the funeral of her husband and in his cult, which clearly gave her status as well. He was given priests and sacrifices were performed, he was considered an integral part of Roman religion throughout the reign of Nero, as attested by *Acta Fratrum Arvalium*.

But there is evidence of contempt for the new cult as well. Cassius Dio wrote that Agrippina and Nero only pretended to grieve for the man whom they had killed; Seneca wrote that, with Claudius' death, “[t]he people of Rome were walking about like free men”; Pliny the Younger

speculated that Nero deified Claudius only to make him a laughingstock. Even the placement of certain temples suggests a slight to Claudius. Suetonius mentions a temple to Claudius on the Caelian Hill, begun by Agrippina. As the Caelian Hill was a peripheral site, associated in legend with an Etruscan bandit, and notorious for its brothels, its selection, likely at least partly a decision of the Senate, seems to reflect hostility to the new cult. Tacitus also mentions a temple erected in Camulodunum in Britain, which was seen as a place of savages and barbarians. The decision to locate an official temple to Claudius in Britain was laughable to Seneca even back then and could be seen as a deliberate insult on the part of the Senate.

Evidence for the subsequent survival of the cult is similarly mixed. The cult came under attack during the reign of Nero, who annulled many of Claudius' decrees and edicts. In addition, Nero neglected and then cancelled the divine honours given to Claudius, and almost completely destroyed the temple on the Caelian hill. From the perspective of the Senate, the cult of Claudius seems to have been largely dismantled by January of 70 A.D, at the beginning of Vespasian's reign. However, later in the same reign there seems to have been an effort to reinstate the cult. Suetonius writes that Vespasian restored Claudius' divine honours and started work on the temple on the Caelian Hill. Cassius Dio also attests to Vespasian's rebuilding programme. Archaeological evidence suggests that the temple at Camulodunum was rebuilt under the Flavian dynasty around 80 - 100. AD. The temple to Claudius in Prusa by Pliny's time had collapsed and there seems to have been some doubt whether the temple had actually been erected in the first place. What happened to the cult after that is difficult to determine, as the inscriptions attesting to it are undated.

To sum up, according to the article, Claudius' involvement with the imperial cult extended from his birth to well after his death. The cult of Divus Claudius was not held in high regard, even by those most responsible for establishing it, yet despite a disastrous beginning under Nero, it survived and appears to have been observed for some time thereafter.