

The Cult of Divus Claudius: Scope and Survival

Christopher Lougheed

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“*Who will worship this man as a god? Who will believe in him?*” (Sen. *Apocol.* 11.)

In posing this question of Claudius, the character of the deified Augustus reveals a central tension within Roman sources on the question of the cult of the Divine Claudius, and indeed of the imperial cult in general. While Tacitus emphasizes the precedent for, and thus the legitimacy of “the Augustales [as] an order of the priesthood dedicated by the Emperor Tiberius to the Julian family, just as Romulus had dedicated one to king Tatius” (Tac. *Hist.* 2.95), it appears that the same degree of legitimation was not always accorded to the cults of individual emperors, however, and seems to have entirely eluded the Divus Claudius. This essay will examine Claudius’ involvement in the Roman imperial cult prior to his own deification, the scope and intentions behind the official Roman cult of the divine Claudius at its outset, and the subsequent survival of the cult under Nero, the Flavians, and the Five Good Emperors.

First, it must be noted that involvement in the imperial cult had defined Claudius even before deification, and indeed, before he was made emperor. Suetonius, the main source for this period of Claudius’ life, emphasizes the intimacy of this connection by placing Claudius’ birth in Lugdunum on “1 August, 10 BC, the very day when the first altar was dedicated there to Augustus the God” (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 2). Seneca confirms Suetonius with respect to the place, stating that Claudius was born “at Lyons, [... and was therefore] a fellow-townsmen of Munatius” (Sen. *Apocol.* 6). As for the date, Suetonius may in fact be in error, since Livy states that it was in 12 BC, and not two years later, that the “altar was dedicated to the divine Caesar at the confluence of the Saône and Rhône, and a priest was appointed, Caius Julius Vercondaridubnus” (Liv. 139). Nevertheless, it does seem clear that Claudius was surrounded by

the nascent imperial cult from childhood, and that this connection may have been considered a proof of his own divinity by the time of Suetonius. In a more active capacity, under Tiberius, Claudius later served as “an extraordinary member of the Augustan priesthood, who were as a rule chosen by lot” (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 6). His involvement in the imperial cult continued in a more atypical form, and evidently against Claudius’ own will, when he “had to pay a fee of 80,000 gold pieces for entering Gaius’ new priesthood” (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 9). Clearly, Claudius was already largely defined largely by his formal role in the worship of the emperors prior to his own installation as princeps.

Claudius may have taken a personal interest in the imperial cult during these years, for, upon ascending the throne, he showed himself willing to personally intervene in the cult, although apparently with modesty and family loyalty as guiding principles. Early in his reign, “when the senate desired to dishonour Gaius, he [Claudius] personally prevented the passage of the measure [...]. Hence the name of Gaius does not occur in the list of emperors whom we mention in our oaths and prayers any more than does that of Tiberius; and yet neither one of them suffered disgrace by official decree.” (Cass. Dio, 60.4). Having confronted the Senate to protect his own family from dishonour, Claudius was also willing to reverse the decisions of previous emperors in order to confer divine honours on Julio-Claudians. Thus, while Tiberius had “vetoed [Livia’s] deification on the pretext that she had herself forbidden this” (Suet. *Tib.* 51), Claudius “made the Senate decree his grandmother Livia divine honours, as well as an elephant-drawn carriage for her image, to match than of Augustus, during ritual processions around the Circus” (Suet, *Div. Claud.* 11). Tacitus, allows for the possibility that, when Tiberius had ordered that “no religious worship was to be decreed, this [had in fact] been her own wish” (Tac. *Ann.* 5.2), in which case the honours bestowed on Claudius’ grandmother point even more

forcefully to a personal policy of aggrandizing his family by means of divine honours. Claudius apparently expected others to share his concern for the operation of the imperial cult, and thus when he honoured the deified Livia with “a statue [...] in the temple of Augustus, [he charged] the Vestal Virgins with the duty of offering the proper sacrifices, and he ordered that women should use her name in taking oaths” (Cass. Dio, 60. 5).

Claudius was apparently much more reticent, however, about applying the imperial cult to himself, and, perhaps with his experiences under Gaius in mind, “did not presume to accept excessive honours” (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 12). Indeed, Claudius apparently placed less importance than Suetonius on “the first day of August, which was his birthday [since on it] there were equestrian contests, but they were not given on his account; it was rather because the temple of Mars had been dedicated on that day” (Cass. Dio, 60.5). Clearly rejecting the status of a living god, Claudius also “forbade any one to worship him or to offer him any sacrifice; he checked the excessive acclamations accorded him; and he accepted, at first, only one image, and that a silver one, and two statues, of bronze and marble, that had been voted to him” (Cass. Dio, 60.5)

Worship of Claudius as living god seems to have occurred nevertheless in the Greek East, although not on the same scale as the earlier cult of Augustus.¹ This cult is reflected by a “(t)emple (naos) to Claudius”² at Cos, and “a head of Claudius”³ in a temple dedicated to Athena in Priene. While neither of these dedications is precisely dated, proof that such honours were being offered to Claudius during his lifetime seems to come in a letter of Pliny the Younger to Trajan, in which he writes that “Claudius Polyaeus left [his house] to Claudius Caesar, with the injunction that a temple should be raised to him in the peristyle, and the rest of the house should

¹ S.R.F Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge, 1984, 62.

² Price, above n.1, 249. (Maiuri no 680.)

³ Price, above n.1, 258. (*BMC Sculpture II* no 1152.)

be let” Plin. *Ep.* 10.70.). If Claudius came to legally possess the home, as the letter implies, he must presumably have been still living at that time, so the honours being offered there clearly exceed what Claudius was willing to accept, according to Dio Cassius; furthermore, the offer of a temple would have been foreign to the West where the cult of the living emperor centered around altars, instead of temples.⁴ Evidently Claudius was unable, and probably also unwilling, to tightly control the imperial cult over the expanse of the empire.

Whatever the extent of the honours offered to Claudius outside of Rome, however, from a Roman perspective the cult of Claudius as god began at his death, with “the business transacted in heaven on the thirteenth of October” (Sen. *Apocol.* 1.) 54 A.D. Ironically, however, the sources suggest a tension within the cult as it was officially established and decreed in Rome, not between divergent religious practices, but between solemnity and outright mockery. First, there is ample evidence of seriousness in the establishment of the cult, especially in the funeral, seen in the precision with which the arrangements are described, and in the frequent comparisons drawn to the funeral and deification of Augustus. Suetonius confirms the date supplied by Seneca for Claudius’ death, and further places the event “during the consulship of Asinius Marcellus and Acilius Aviola, in his sixty-fourth year, and the fourteenth of his reign” (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 45); he also emphasizes the solemnity of the process by which Claudius “was given a princely funeral and officially deified” (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 45), with, as Dio Cassius specifies, “all other honours that had been accorded to Augustus” (Cass. Dio, 61.35). Tacitus presents a more elaborate account of these arrangements, again emphasizing the parallels to the funeral of Augustus, writing that “[d]ivine honours were decreed to Claudius, and his funeral rites were solemnized

⁴ D. Fishwick. *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire, Volume III: Provincial Cult, Part 1: Institution and Evolution*, Leiden, 2002, 146.

on the same scale as those of Augustus” (Tac. *Ann.* 12.69) and that his funeral “was soon followed by deification” (Tac. *Ann.* 13.2).

There is, indeed, some evidence for real enthusiasm for the new cult of Divus Claudius in Rome. Tacitus, for one, presents Agrippina as an active participant in the funeral of her late husband and in his cult, stating that she “strove to emulate the magnificence of her great-grandmother, Livia” (Tac. *Ann.* 12.69). Agrippina clearly gained status from the cult of her husband, especially after “[t]he Senate [...] decreed her two lictors, with the office of priestess to Claudius” (Tac. *Ann.* 13.2). Similarly, when “[Nero] pronounced Claudius’ panegyric, [...] there was enthusiasm both in himself and his audience.” (Tac. *Ann.* 13.3)

There are, however, also both implicit and explicit indications of contempt for the new cult in Rome, at least in the view of certain sources. Dio Cassius writes that “Agrippina and Nero pretended to grieve for the man whom they had killed, and elevated to heaven him whom they had carried out on a litter from the banquet” (Cass. Dio 61.35). Also, although Seneca had written the funeral oration which Nero read (Tac. *Ann.* 13.3), he later wrote that, with Claudius’ death, “[t]he people of Rome were walking about like free men” (Sen. *Apocol.* 12). Similarly, “Lucius Junius Gallio, the brother of Seneca, [...] said that i]nasmuch as the public executioners were accustomed to drag the bodies of those executed in the prison to the Forum with large hooks, and from there hauled them to the river, [...] Claudius had been raised to heaven with a hook” (Cass. Dio, 61.35). Pliny the Younger even speculates that “Nero deified Claudius only to make him a laughing stock” (Plin. *Pan.* 11.1).

There seems to also be an implicit slight to Claudius in the placement of the temples accorded to the Divus Claudius. Suetonius mentions “a temple to Claudius the God on the Caelian Hill, begun by Agrippina” (Suet. *Div. Vesp.* 9). As the Caelian Hill was a peripheral site,

associated in legend with an Etruscan bandit, and “notorious for its meat market and brothels,”⁵ its selection, likely at least partly a decision of the Senate⁶ seems to reflect hostility to the cult of Divus Claudius. Tacitus also mentions “[a] temple [...] erected to the Divine Claudius” (Tac. *Ann.* 14.31) in Camulodunum; Seneca portrays the British temple as a place where “the savages now worship him and, as if he were a god, pray ‘to happen on the fool when well-disposed’” (Sen. *Apocol.* 8.). Fishwick interprets the remark as referring to a new temple decreed by the Senate as part of the divine honours of Claudius; if indeed this is the case, then the decision to locate an official temple to Claudius in Britain is not only laughable to Seneca, but perhaps a deliberate insult on the part of the Senate.⁷

Evidence for the subsequent survival of the cult is similarly mixed, and the cult in Britain evidently fell victim to non-Roman forces when the temple at Camulodunum was destroyed in the revolt of the Iceni and Trinovantes in AD. 61. Although Dio Cassius discusses the revolt without any mention of the temple, Tacitus lists it as a chief cause of the rebellion. Far from being particularly appropriate for barbarians, as Seneca had suggested, the “temple [...] erected to the Divine Claudius [...] and] ever before their eyes [was in fact] a citadel, as it seemed, of perpetual tyranny,” and a financial burden, as “[m]en chosen as priests had to squander their whole fortunes under the pretence of a religious ceremonial” (Tac. *Ann.* 14.31). When Camulodunum was actually attacked, “the temple [,] where the soldiers had assembled, was stormed after a two days' siege,” and presumably “plundered or fired in the onslaught” (Tac. *Ann.* 14.32) with the rest of the town.

⁵ D. Fishwick, above n. 3, 87.

⁶ D. Fishwick, above n. 3, 87.

⁷ D. Fishwick, above n. 3, 86.

In Rome the evidence is more contradictory. Sacrifices were evidently performed to Divus Claudius and considered an integral part of Roman religion throughout the reign of Nero, as attested to by the Acta Fratrum Arvalium. On III idus October 58, the priesthood “immolavit in Capitolio [...] divo Claudio b(ovem) marem,”⁸ and later, “in templo novo divo Aug. [...] divo Claudio boves m(ares) II” on VIII k. Iulias 59. As late as 69, under Otho, the sacrifice of October 58 was repeated⁹, again on the Capitol. The cult came under attack during the period, however, as “Nero annulled many of Claudius’ decrees and edicts, on the ground that he had been a doddering old idiot; and enclosed the place where he had been cremated with nothing better than a low rubble wall” (Suet. *Nero* 33). In addition, “Nero neglected and then cancelled” (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 45) the divine honours awarded to Claudius, and the temple on the Caelian hill was “almost completely destroyed by Nero” (Suet. *Div. Vesp.* 288). From the perspective of the Senate, then, the cult of Claudius seems to have been largely dismantled by January of A.D. 70, as the reign of Vespasian was beginning. In the decree which established the scope of the new emperor’s power, the Senate granted him the right to conclude treaties “just as the deified Augustus and Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus and Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus had”¹⁰ possessed. The text clearly does not extend the divinity of Augustus to both Tiberius and Claudius, since Tiberius was never deified; the implication, therefore, is that the senate does not consider Claudius to be deified either at this point.

Later in the same reign, however, there seems to have been an effort to reinstate the cult of the Divine Claudius. Suetonius writes that “Vespasian restored” (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 45) Claudius’ divine honours and that he “started work on [...] the] temple to Claudius the God on

⁸ H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Berlin, 1962. Vol I, 229. (Rome VI 2041.2042 Hezen act. Arv.).

⁹ H. Dessau, above n. 8, 241. (Rome VI 2051 Hezen act. Arv.).

¹⁰ N. Lewis and M. Reinhold, *Roman Civilization Vol.2, 3rd ed*, New York, 1900, 11. *CIL vol VI, no. 930*.

the Caelian Hill, begun by Agrippina but almost completely destroyed by Nero” (Suet. *Div. Vesp.* 9). Dio Cassius, while he does not mention the temple to Claudius in particular, also attests to Vespasian’s rebuilding programme when he writes that “(he) also repaired the sacred precincts and public works which had suffered injury and rebuilt such as had already fallen into ruin” (Cass. Dio, 65.10). It seems from archeological evidence that the temple at Camulodunum was rebuilt under the Flavian dynasty, “ca. A.D. 80-100,”¹¹ although there is no further mention of it in literary sources or epigraphy. Vespasian’s apparent devotion to Claudius is explained by his connection to the late emperor: he had “served [...] at times directly under Claudius, earning triumphal decorations; and [...] had] held a couple of priesthoods, as well as a consulship for the last two months of the year” (Suet. *Div. Vesp.* 4). Furthermore, Vespasian’s son Titus “[had grown] up at Court with [Claudius’ son] Britannicus, sharing his teachers and following the same curriculum [; t]he two boys were such close friends that when Britannicus drank his fatal dose of poison, Titus, who was reclining at the same table, is said to have tasted it as well” (Suet. *Div. Titus* 2). Apparently, then, motives similar to those of Claudius in deifying Livia motivated Vespasian to restore the cult of Claudius.

The subsequent survival of the cult of Claudius is difficult to determine, and the inscriptions attesting to it are undated. In Italy, it seems that L. Lollius Orio, an aedile and praefectus fabrum, was an “Aug. Claud.” in Beneventum.¹² Similar positions were held by A. Vibbius Ianuarius¹³ and C. Iulius Cypaerus¹⁴ in Beneventum, by Q. Poblucius Modestinus¹⁵ in

¹¹ D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire, Volume III: Provincial Cult, Part Three: The Provincial Centre; Provincial Cult*, Leiden, 2002, 145.

¹² H. Dessau, above n. 8. Vol II Pars I, 6499. (Beneventi IX 1648 vidit Mommsen).

¹³ H. Dessau, above n. 12, 5066. (Beneventi I 1541. IX 1705 viderunt Mommsen et Dressel).

¹⁴ H. Dessau, above n. n. 12, 6500. (Beneventi Notize degli scavi 1894 p. 388).

¹⁵ H. Dessau, above n. 12, 4313. (Bononiae XI 696 vidit Bormann).

Bononia, and by L. Aufillenus Ascanius¹⁶ near Verona. In Spain, the “sod(ales) Claudiani” attended the funeral of T. Octavius Saturninus.¹⁷ As for the temple to Claudius in Prusa, [by Pliny’s time] the whole house ha[d] tumbled to pieces, peristyle included: and indeed hardly anything remain[ed] but the ground on which it stood” (Plin. *Ep.* 10.70); there seems to have been, in fact, some doubt over whether the temple had actually been erected in the first place. This apparent decline in the cult of Claudius is typical of the Greek East: of all the priesthoods to Claudius there “none needs to be placed much (if any) later than his reign.”¹⁸ Trajan, nonetheless, suggests his own respect for the cult of Divus Claudius when he replies to Pliny that “if it [the temple] *was* erected, then, although it may have fallen down, the ground on which it stood is sacred.” (Plin. *Ep.* 10.71)

In conclusion, Claudius’ involvement with the imperial cult extended from his birth to well after his death, and was closely connected to the political state of Rome and of the empire. The cult of Divus Claudius was not held in universally 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. In the shifting politics of the Roman Empire, the fate of Divus Claudius, though a unique example, may reflect the problems faced by the imperial cult as a whole.

¹⁶ H. Dessau, above n. 12, 6700. (Avio ad Athesim, inter Veronam et Tridentum V 4800 vidit Pais).

¹⁷ Vives, Jose. *Inscripciones Latinas de la Espana Romana: Antologia de 6.800 textos*, Barcelona, 1970, 4821. (Cabeza del Griego (Cuenca) H 3114).

¹⁸ Price, above n.1, 62.