THE CHANGING PICTURE OF CLAUDIUS

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Perhaps the most striking feature about the modern estimate of Claudius is the tremendous change which it has undergone. Initially, rather uncritical dependence on sources that were primarily literary resulted in the acceptance of the views on Claudius that were put most strikingly therein. Fullness of treatment, as in Suetonius, or attractive and sophisticated presentation of subject matter, as in Tacitus, tended to shape modern appraisals, especially as the large degree of concord in the interpretations presented by such sources obscured the need for a critical reappraisal of certain inconsistencies in the ancient tradition. Claudius was in this way represented as physically and mentally feeble and ineffectual, the tool of his scheming, glamorous wives and of his unscrupulous, upstart freedmen. A picture this which reflected the scandal mongering and gossip of an inimical senate and imperial court. The latter largely consisted of the noble families linked to the Julio-Claudian line by the web of relationships so skilfully spun by Augustus long since, and continued to a less extent by his successors. Consequently their views coincided to a considerable degree with those of the senate.

With the application of techniques of economic and sociological analysis to the study of the Roman empire came a realization of the careful and responsible government provided through the Principate. The development of the provinces, largely owing to a complex and painstaking imperial administration, was seen in all its significance, a significance hitherto obscured by the literary sources which had concentrated attention almost exclusively on Rome and court circles. Social mobility, which had won for the Princeps the interested support of the groups which benefited, was seen to be a new and characteristic feature introduced by the new order. The literary sources — which do not interest themselves in administrative history — were reexamined, facts being sifted free of their interpretations when these could be shown to be subjectively interpolated. It thus emerged that Claudius was capable of putting away wives who were a political encumbrance. The first two wives, married while Claudius was unimportant, were also not of the highest distinction, and Claudius did not scruple to divorce them. There is no evidence that Claudius evinced any of the reactions of an outraged lover at the affaire of Messalina — his anxiety was only for his throne — and his marriage with Agrippina Junior had obvious political motives. And he could discipline freedmen ministers when necessary. The consistency and firmness of his government were realized. A thorough-going reappraisal resulted and Claudius came to be seen as a devoted and hard-work-

1 Syme The Roman Revolution, 1952, 420—22 and Genealogical Table No. III.
2 Ib. 434—437.
4 Syme R.R., 352; Oost, op. cit. 113.
5 Cf. von Fritz, op. cit. 59; Oost, op. cit. 125—126.
6 Oost, p. 122 and n. 21; McAlindon, 'Senatorial Opposition to Claudius and Nero', A.J.P. 77, 1956, 118.
7 Seneca Apocolocyntosis 13.
ing administrator, the organizer of a complex, centralized bureaucratic machine.

Recently, current disenchantment with bureaucratic administration and with the results of managerial revolutions has brought about a much-needed reassessment of the new Claudius. Misgivings arising from the fact that there is unimpeachable evidence behind the old view and that the newer one is reconstructed primarily on a priori grounds, have led to the placing of greater emphasis on the significance of the personal element in the government of Claudius' reign. There is less readiness to attribute praise or blame, more emphasis on the influence of their milieu on both Claudius and the senate.

Explanation of the different pictures presented by senatorial circles on the one hand and by provincial development on the other has been found in imperial encroachment on senatorial powers in the interests of the provinces. There was an ambivalence in the emperor's position, which has been termed 'the fundamental lie of the principate', that was imperfectly appreciated by senatorial contemporaries. Close association with the senate in government was necessary if the principate, basically a military monarchy, was to enjoy whole-hearted support from all sectors of the population, for the senate had come to be equated with constitutionalism. But by tradition senatorial government meant the absolute control of state policy by an oligarchy of peers, at least in the view of the important senatorial families. The implications of the new order had been so well concealed by Augustus that the nobility did not really become aware of their altering position till after his death. But Caligula's absolutism and the operation of the principle of hereditary succession to produce what promised to be another incapable princeps made these implications so nakedly obvious that unprecedented senatorial resistance resulted. Besides, in terms of administration, the introduction of bureaux into government would inevitably result in the supersession of the less efficient senatorial procedure.

On the other hand the army, which had come to be a body with interests and composition alien to that of the civilian population, especially that of Rome, had completely lost confidence in the civil government and looked to the emperor as its champion and protector. Thus in fact responsibility for government lay with the emperor, who could not in reason be expected to subordinate himself to the authority of a corporate body lacking, even collectively, final responsibility.

Hence the invitation extended to the Senate to participate in government, necessary for propagandist purposes, did not involve any mandates of real

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8 Oost, op. cit. 125 and n. 27; Syme Tacitus, 1958, vol. 1, 437.
9 Oost, op. cit. 124 and n. 24.
10 Von Fritz, op. cit. 88.
12 Basically, the Principate was an attempt to disguise monarchy in the form and even the spirit of the old Republic; hence the Emperors, at first at any rate, could not use members of the ruling classes for the supervision of the details of the administration of their newly won position of power: Oost, op. cit. 113.
13 McAlindon, op. cit. 131.
14 Scramuzza The Emperor Claudius, 1940, 84—85.
16 Von Fritz, op. cit. 88.
authority. Senatorial reluctance to compromise prestige and administrative power by acceptance of functions which would imply or involve subordination meant that the Emperors had to find new instruments of government both in personnel and in machinery — yet the need for propagandist exploitation of the senate persisted.

Naturally, under efficient emperors there was more rapid expansion of the powers necessary to meet the governmental duties of an imperial administration thus deprived of extensive senatorial cooperation. So under Claudius the long-evident trend towards a bureaucracy centred on the palace was finally formally recognised by the establishment of an official system. The contrasting claims of senate and Princeps were in consequence felt with a new intensity. The senate had long since been moved aside from a position of real military power by the demographic changes in officering of the first century B.C. Executive power too had largely gone with the advent of the newly structured provincial establishment of the Principate. Consequently the growth of a centralized imperial administration in the interests both of efficiency and of the security of the Princeps meant intrusion into the only area of authority remaining to the senate. Schooled by its previous experience of the principate and with its functions already cruelly delimited, the senate was all the more bitterly conscious of the significance of the change.

It is indeed true that the change represents merely the public recognition of a shift of administrative powers that had long been operative. But to claim that the change is purely of a formal nature is grossly to underestimate its implications. Replacement by their social and political inferiors involved denigration and disparagement of the senate, leading necessarily to an undermining of what remained of their social and political preeminence. And the fact that the Princeps gave this recognition meant a hardening of his attitude towards the senate, which felt such a change all the more in that the Princeps, by thus extending his policy of consolidating his own power by the advancement of other groups at senatorial expense, was further stripping the senate of support from those other sources.

Because Claudius' capacity as head of an imperial government had been underrated, in their second thoughts scholars have been inclined in reaction to assign far too much of the development of administrative machinery attributable to his reign to his personal intervention. It is true that there was great progress in this regard during his reign and that a firm and consistent line of policy can be discerned in administrative development throughout. But some wrong conclusions have been drawn from these facts. To argue from the nature of Claudius' administration to conclusions about his personality is not legitimate; and, though Claudius may have been the organizer of his ministries, this does not mean that he directed their development in detail. There is no evidence that e.g. Pallas' ministry was created by Claudius or that the ministries in general were developed to an administrative blue-print. Some of these functionaries had in fact existed before Claudius; two ministers are clearly visible in the

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17 The process is traced by Suolahti and Smith in the passages to which reference has been made in note 15 above.
18 Mattingly Roman Imperial Civilisation, 1957, 120—122.
19 Oost, op. cit. pp. 124—125 and 127—128.
administration of Tiberius. But, though the posts may have existed before, the senate considered such posts too compromising for acceptance, and was particularly hostile to Claudius anyway. There is evidence that Claudius tried to attract the equestrian order into his administrative service, throwing certain governorships open to them and increasing their opportunities for amassing wealth. But the equites too felt that employ in the chancery of the Princeps was below the dignity of their station. When Claudius was in consequence constrained to fall back on his freedmen, equestrian dignity was outraged and active opposition resulted: Claudius was able to rely on the order far less than his predecessors and had to execute 300 of its members. A vicious circle set in, leading to increasing estrangement on both sides. Although the principate had managed without central bureaux for 70 years and Claudius had no particular interest in building up the power of his servants, a situation in this way developed — it had been impossible for freedman so to rise before the first century A.D. and in the second century A.D. these offices were given to the Equites — in which the departmental empire-building of the emperor's freedmen was encouraged as the sole means remaining of providing an adequate administration. Just as suggestions for the improvement of the palace administrative routines were most likely to emanate from the personnel executing them, so the unplanned and uncoordinated activities of functionaries, each intent merely on increasing the efficiency and extent of his own particular sphere of authority, vastly strengthened Claudius' position. The mushroom growth of the various departments meant increased power and efficiency for Claudius as well as the departmental head concerned. The problem of the non-cooperation with the imperial administration of senatorial and equestrian orders was solved. The tendency of centralized government towards further centralization moved both hostile groups further away from positions of authority without endangering the Princeps inasmuch as his new administrative personnel, though given enormous increase of power, had no association with influential social, political or economic groups.

The tidy picture of the unity of senatorial opposition and its consistency throughout the reign has also been considerably altered. Analysis of its background shows there were no ideological issues behind the opposition to Claudius. The institution of the principate was acceptable in some, if not all, philosophical circles. Return to a Republic was simply not feasible; at most the senate aimed at securing a Princeps suitable to itself by promoting his accession. But prosopography has shown that serious opposition to the principate even within the senate was very limited. There were families which generations-old feuds with the principate predisposed to hostility. Others were rendered dangerous by their relationship to the imperial family. Claudius was in a very

20 Scramuzza, op. cit. 84.
21 lb. 81—82; it was only at a later date that service in the Princeps' household came to appear desirable to the Equites: 85.
22 Oost, op. cit. 114.
23 Ibid. pp. 127 and 124 respectively.
24 Scramuzza, op. cit. 84—85.
25 McAlindon, op. cit. pp. 131—132 and n. 188.
26 Momigliano Claudius: the Emperor and his achievement, 1934, 21.
27 McAlindon, op. cit. pp. 114 and 119f.
difficult position here. 'The Emperors cannot be held responsible for the position in which they found themselves and can only be judged by their actions in excess of what was necessary for their own survival and the adequate performance of their duties' \(^{28}\). Even the irreconcilables of the philosophical opposition seem to have been activated by personal motives \(^{29}\). Yet there was general, if rather passive, hostility in the senate as result of the diminution of its power and prestige. The purges — and replenishments — effected by the civil war and Domitian were needed to produce the docile senate of Trajan \(^{30}\). The fashion of disregarding imputations of treason in the trials of Claudius' reign has been replaced by the sobering realization, originating from close analysis of charges and those arraigned, that sentences seem generally to have been merited: in fact 'the plotting of a stubborn opposition was involved more frequently than hostile sources are prepared to admit' \(^{31}\). It seems that, after Claudius' initial policy of conciliation had been nullified by his precautionary and reorganizing measures, a hostile senate abused the measure of independence granted it by putting up consuls of known hostility to the emperor for the years 44—46. Half the known casualties of the reign and the most turgid senatorial opposition to the princeps fall in the period extending to 47. In this year Claudius took drastic action: trials \textit{intra cubiculum} commenced; there was a censorial revision of the senate; and apparently Claudius took control of elections to the consulship. He had a gift for appointing safe men: no consuls elected after 47 are known to have been hostile to him. Imperial candidates at senior levels now began to change the face of the senate \(^{32}\). There was a pretence of respect for the preeminence of major senatorial families: Claudius reversed current trends in the election to the high dignity of the priestly offices, where the numbers of \textit{novi homines} (i.e. men who were each the first members of their respective families to attain to this elevated position) elected were nearly halved, while patrician numbers were almost trebled. The positions were largely formal, so no shifting of real power resulted, but patrician predominance in the priesthods gave a Republican atmosphere to Claudius' senate \(^{33}\). But there was a significant drop in the numbers of patrician consuls (30% of total consuls elected) as compared to the reigns of Augustus (53%) or Tiberius (37%) — Caligula's reign (19%) is too short to be truly significant — and an increase in \textit{novi homines} (Augustus 35%, Tiberius 42% [Caligula 50%], Claudius 53%). As the consulship still maintained some degree of authority, this meant a real shift of power to the Emperor through his creatures thus elected \(^{34}\). Claudius' admission of provincials into the senate gradually altered the composition of that body and abated its opposition by the introduction of a growing number of dissentients \(^{35}\). The transition to the

\(^{28}\) Ibid. 131, cf. also p. 128.

\(^{29}\) Ibid. 132, n. 188.

\(^{30}\) Ibid. 130—131.


\(^{32}\) McAlindon, 'Claudius and the Senators', 283—286.

\(^{33}\) Lewis \textit{The Official Priests of Rome under the Julio-Claudians}, 1955, 164—165; for the statistics cf. the Appendix, 171—174.

\(^{34}\) Ibid. 166—170 and the Appendix.

\(^{35}\) Syme \textit{Tacitus}, 1, 459—461. Disorders in Gaul helped the finding of this statesmanlike decision.
Flavian senate is decisively begun under Claudius, even to the detail that he relied as a consequence on the army more than his predecessors had.

Explanation of source difficulties is more easy when this background to the literary — i.e. senatorial and court — tradition is appreciated. It is quite possible that Claudius feigned stupidity to stay alive — no mean feat this — amid the febrile plottings of the Julio-Claudian court. Improbably, 7 of Suetonius' 12 emperors have defective legs or gait (just as all the Julio-Claudian emperors are reputed, somewhere or other in the sources, to have been murdered). There is literary evidence of Claudius' tremendous capacity for work and non-literary evidence of his competence, so, in view of the senatorial guilt complex, arising from participation in convictions, manifest in the exaggerated denunciations of Claudius in a later age, it seems safe to disregard his alleged physical or mental feebleness. There is clear evidence of the development in Nero's time of a derogatory picture of Claudius; the earlier, favourable one subsists however and is borne out, uniquely in the Julio-Claudian emperors, by the minor historians. Though Tacitus is generally disparaging, Suetonius is aware only of court criticism: outside circles were favourable. Dio, confronted by a dual tradition, gives the favourable view and Pliny is uniformly approving, though writing in an anti-Claudian age. But there is solid evidence, as has been said, to indicate that Claudius' coarse sensual traits, though exaggerated, did exist. They are certainly not disproved by evidence of efficient administration. And the picture of his freedmen as influential departmental heads, available for consultation and subject to general direction, best reconciles literary and non-literary evidence of their influence. It is clear that in the Claudian court a marked capacity for intrigue was as indispensable to success as administrative talent of a high order: Pallas' advocacy of Agrippina secured for him pride of place over Narcissus, hitherto the chief imperial freedman. When Pallas' advocacy of the marriage with Agrippina and adoption of Nero in fact changed the history of the Roman empire, it is pointless to question the influence of Claudius' freedmen. Yet Claudius was by no means the tool of his wives (two of whom he divorced and another of whom he had executed) or of his freedmen (five of whom he condemned, important though they were). The consistency and firmness of the government clearly indicates that its final direction lay throughout the reign with Claudius. Some qualification must be introduced into either extreme view of him. He was neither a pawn nor a master-mind: his actions were to some extent dictated by forces beyond his control and moral responsibility for the executions of his reign is not easy to assign.

36 Scramuzza, op cit. 82.
37 Ib. pp. 43 and 88—89 respectively.
38 McAlinden, 'Senatorial Opposition to Claudius and Nero', 119.
39 As e.g. in Seneca Ad Polybium (cf. the Apostolocystosis) and Josephus Bellum Iudaicum (cf. the Antiquitates Iudaicae). The minor authorities are Philostratus, Hegesippus, Eutropius, Orosius, and Aurelius Victor.
40 The sources are analysed by Scramuzza, 5—34.
41 Cf. von Fritz, op cit. 80, on the errors inherent in reasoning from good provincial administration to the character of the emperor concerned.
42 Oost, op. cit. pp. 114, 120—122 and 129—130.
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