MEDICAL HISTORY

The death of Claudius

V J Marmion FRCPE FRCOphth T E J Wiedemann MA PhD[1]

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Although the lifestyle of the Roman Emperor Claudius was characterized by overwork, gluttony and poor health, he survived to the remarkable age of 64. Even then, the circumstances of his death aroused suspicion. Was he poisoned?

The Claudians were amongst the oldest patrician families in Roman society, and they entered the imperial line through the marriage of Livia to the Emperor Augustus (Box 1). The early life of her grandson Claudius was not propitious. His physical disabilities were such that, when he assumed the *toga virilis* on reaching his majority, he was taken for the ceremony at night; and similarly, in 6 AD, on the occasion of a gladiatorial spectacle in memory of his father Drusus, Augustus required him to attend covered in a cloak. Through his early studies Claudius became a considerable historian and acquired a detailed knowledge of the law, but there seemed no likelihood that this ungainly figure would ever be nominated Emperor. The death of Augustus in 14 AD put him fourth in line of succession, after Tiberius, Germanicus and Gaius Caligula. However, Germanicus died, and 4 years of despotic horror led to the assassination of the Emperor Caligula in 41 AD.

Claudius' first public office had been as consul at the beginning of Caligula's rule; and his performance in that post must have impressed the praetorians greatly to account for his rapid selection as Emperor. The 13 years of his reign were marked by progress through consolidation, the conquest of Britain (which he visited for sixteen days) and the development of the imperial civil service. He was married four times—to Plautia, Paetina, Messalina and Agrippina. In the matter of his death, suspicion has fallen particularly upon Agrippina.

Box 1 **Claudius and his relations**

Augustus 31BC–14AD	Married (2) Livia
Tiberius 14–37AD	Son of Livia by her first marriage; adopted son of Augustus
Gaius Caligula 37–41AD	Grandson of Augustus
Claudius 41–54AD	Grandson of Livia; nephew of Tiberius
Agrippina d.59AD	Daughter of Germanicus (brother of Claudius); granddaughter of Julia; great granddaughter of Augustus

CIRCUMSTANCES

Many explanations have been proposed for Claudius' early disabilities, including most recently a movement disorder[1], but there is no reason to think they were the cause of his death in October 54. Levick[2] judges that, while murder cannot be proven, on balance it looks as if his departure was brought about by Agrippina 'rather than due to her good luck'. In reaching this conclusion Levick cites the Senecan *Octavia* (68 AD)[3] and Pliny the Elder[4], both of whom assume murder.

Agrippina was anxious that her son Nero rather than Britannicus (Claudius' son by Messalina) should succeed as Emperor; and the prospects for Britannicus would greatly improve in five months' time when he gained his majority and acquired not only the same rights as Nero to the property of the Caesars but also political power. No wonder that, when Claudius died, enemies were eager to spread rumours about the death. Moreover, proof of poisoning was usually impossible, and successful prosecutions depended more on motive than medical evidence—as indicated by Tacitus[5] in the case of Piso.

The death

The nearest we have to a contemporary account of Claudius' death is in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*[6], probably written in December 54. This satire has the death taking place while Claudius was being entertained by a group of comic actors—which may be a jibe at his low tastes but does indicate that the final illness came on quickly. (Those not present might well have thought the process longer, because for security reasons the death was not announced till next day.) The illness began between the sixth and seventh hours (about noon) and death occurred between then and one o'clock. Seneca is quite clear about the timing. Claudius began to gasp his last and could find no way to go—*animam agere coepit nec invenire exitum poterat*. In

Formerly of Bristol Eye Hospital and University of Bristol, and [1]Department of Latin, University of Nottingham, UK. Professor Wiedemann died in June 2001.
Correspondence to: V J Marmion, 6 Norland Road, Clifton, Bristol BS8 3LP, UK

Seneca's version, Mercury appeals to Clotho to let him die quickly, a request which seems to be granted. The Emperor's death is depicted unkindly:

> *Ultima vox eius haec inter homines audita est, cum maiorem sonitum emisset illequae facillius loquebatur, 'va me, puto concacavi me'.*
> [This was the last utterance of his to be heard among men, after he let out a sound from that part with which he found it easier to communicate, 'Oh I think I have shit myself'].

Seneca goes on to remark, *Certa omnia con[ca]cavit* [He certainly shat up everything else]. If the Emperor had vomited as well, Seneca would surely not have been too delicate to mention it.

Mushrooms

The tradition that death was due to mushroom poisoning surfaces in Tacitus[5], Suetonius[7], Dio Cassius[8] and Juvenal[9]. Dio, writing in the third century, offers a detailed description of how Agrippina shared a plate of mushrooms, one of them poisoned, with her husband; and Josephus[10] reports the same rumour. The suggestion is that some substance was *added*. Tacitus, early second century, claims that a poisoned feather was administered to Claudius by his personal physician Xenophon.

Of the poisonous mushrooms in the Mediterranean region, suspicion has fallen most on the genus *Amanita*. *Amanita muscaria* and *A. pantheria* are seldom fatal in adults[11]. *A. phalloides* (the deathcap) is highly dangerous and has been incriminated by Benjamin[12] in the case of Claudius. However, this does not fit the picture very well. This mushroom takes 10–15 hours to act, and toxicity arises in three phases, culminating in liver failure. The timing, therefore, is inconsistent with the accounts of Seneca, Tacitus and Dio, though admittedly in Suetonius' account Claudius dies towards morning after a night of excruciating pain[13]. Another mushroom candidate, *Coprimus atramentarius*, produces disulfiram, which in combination with alcohol would have caused nausea, vomiting and other symptoms; Claudius was notorious for intemperance.

Other poisons

Tacitus' reference to the insertion of a feather by Xenophon suggests that the Emperor was not vomiting spontaneously; and, though Suetonius refers to vomiting, this could have been a response to Xenophon's manoeuvre. There is not much credibility in Tacitus' insinuation that Xenophon himself—who had been amply rewarded for loyal service[14]—committed the murder by applying poison to the Emperor's throat. It is more likely that the physician was testing the reflexes of his dying patient. As to the possibility that Agrippina put poison on one of the Emperor's mushrooms, that must remain entirely a matter for speculation. However, as Levick points out[1], those present at the banquet do not seem to have suspected poisoning of any sort; moreover, the eunuch Halotus, whose job was to taste the Emperor's food, kept his job when Nero assumed the throne—evidence that nobody wanted to put him out of the way, either as an accomplice or as a witness to empericide.

CONCLUSION

We see no reason to believe that Claudius was murdered. All the features are consistent with sudden death from cerebrovascular disease, which was common in Roman times. Towards the end of 52 AD, at the age of 62, Claudius had a serious illness and spoke of approaching death. Around that time there were changes in his depiction in busts, cameos and coins—with thick neck, narrow shoulders and flat chest[16]. The *Apocolocyntosis*, addressed to an audience some of whom were present at the death, makes clear that there is no need to postulate poisoning, accidental or otherwise.

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