Claudius Essay, Research Paper

Claudius

Emperor A. D. 41 – 54

Claudius was found hiding behind some balcony curtains by soldiers in the palace after the murder of Caligula by the Praetorian Guard. Instead of seizing and killing him, as Claudius was almost sure they would do, they raised him up on their shoulders and made him emperor! Many writers have depicted Claudius as kind of a befuddled, harmless old man who had been made Emperor so that Romans would have someone in high

places to make fun of. In truth, he was an able administrator and ruled well, making many improvements in the government. He gave orders for the conquest of Britain, which the famous Julius Caesar had only invaded and left. The invasion was well planned and carried out. After some of the early battles had been won, he came to Britain to lead the troops in person. Most historians, including Tacitus agree that Claudius desperately needed a few military victories to boost his image amongst the Roman people, and the conquest of Britain made him quite popular in Rome.

Much of what contemporary historians wrote about the Roman emperors and their families at that time showed them in an extremely bad light. The passages in Suetonois’ Lives of the Caesars read like a modern soap opera. Tacitus deliberately painted the worst picture he could of the imperial families. He longed for the values and government of the old Roman Republic. His attitude was that the only thing good that could be said about the Empire with its overly powerful and autocratic rulers was that it was better than the constant civil wars of the Republican era.

Claudius was never very lucky in love. One woman he was to have married died on their wedding day. His last wife, the infamous Messalina, continuously cheated on him, even giving many of their household treasures to her lovers. Claudius was very much in love with her and tried to ignore what was going on. Messalina finally exhausted even Claudius’ patience when she married one of her lovers while still married to Claudius. Told by his advisors that this was a direct threat to him as emperor, he sadly signed the order for her execution so eagerly prepared by the men close to him. According to Tacitus, a centurion found her distraught and begging for her life. He offered her a dagger so she could kill herself, a death considered honorable by the Roman aristocracy. When she attempted but could not bring herself to commit suicide, he ran her through with his short sword. Claudius finally ended up marrying Agrippina the Younger, mother of the future emperor Nero. Claudius may have died from an illness but the historians of the period have charged Agrippina with his murder. She supposedly fed him a dish of poisoned mushrooms.