

THE ETRUSCAN EMPEROR CLAUDIUS

In Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, Claudius cannot make himself understood upon his entrance into heaven. After the deceased emperor had been asked about his nationality, the interrogators reported to Jupiter: (*sc. Claudium*) *respondisse nescio quid perturbato sono et uoce confusa; non intellegere se linguam eius, nec Graecum esse nec Romanum nec ullius gentis notae* (5.2). The first part of this report suggests that Claudius could not be understood because of the manner of his speech. Commentators have rightly seen this as a reference to his speech impediments and refer to Suetonius' biography (Claud. 30: *linguae titubantia*; also Claud. 4.6) and Dio (60.2.2)¹). The second part has not been fully explained. It satirises not only the manner of Claudius' speech²), but also the language that he was speaking, neither

1) Cf., e.g., A. P. Ball, *The Satire of Seneca on the Apotheosis of Claudius* (New York 1902) 175; P. T. Eden, *Seneca, Apocolocyntosis* (Cambridge 1984) 83.

2) Ball, *op. cit.* 175, and Eden, *op. cit.* 83, compare Petr. 73.3 ([*sc. Trimalchio*] *coepit Menecratis cantica lacerare, sicut illi dicebant qui linguam eius intellegabant*), but the passage contains something more.

Greek, nor Latin, nor that of any known people. Quite probably, Seneca is suggesting that Claudius was speaking in the Etruscan language, regarded even by contemporaries as incomprehensible and related to no other known language. Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes that the Etruscan race ἀρχαῖόν τε πάνυ καὶ οὐδενὶ ἄλλῳ γένει οὔτε ὁμόγλωσσον οὔτε ὁμοδίαιτον (ὄν) εὕρισκεται (1.30.2). Claudius' interest in things Etruscan is well-known³). He wrote the history of the Etruscans in twenty books (Suet. Claud. 42.8) and introduced Etruscan religious ceremonies, which did not survive his reign, at Rome (Tac. Ann. 12.8.2). The view that Seneca is at least in part referring to the emperor's historical work is confirmed by a statement at Apoc. 5.4. After Hercules had addressed the emperor with a quotation from Homer, *Claudius gaudet esse illic philologos homines, sperat futurum aliquem historiis suis locum*⁴). Claudius' interest in things Etruscan was undoubtedly known to many of his contemporaries, particularly those for whom Seneca wrote his satire. They would have appreciated that the philosopher's remarks derided every aspect of the dead emperor's life and character. More to the point, however, is the possibility that Seneca is pointing to the Etruscan origin of the *gens Claudia*, an origin that was transformed into a more acceptable Sabine descent when the Romans eliminated Etruscan elements from their early history⁵). Claudius' work on Etruscan matters perhaps contributed to the unmasking of this process, and it is possible that the emperor himself revealed the truth about the ancestry of his *gens*. Later in the *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca exploits this origin of the Claudians with brilliant effect. Claudius, whom Augustus accuses of killing relatives, friends, senators and many others (Apoc. 10–12), was nothing less than another Tarquinius Superbus in Seneca's view⁶).

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3) For a survey and comments on the seriousness of Claudian's endeavours, cf. D. Rebuffat-Emmanuel, Un Étruscologue victime de son temps: l'Empereur Claude, Ann. Fac. des Lettres et Sciences humaines d'Aix 43 (1967) 209–215.

4) Eden, *op. cit.* 86, thinks that the books of Etruscan and Carthaginian history are the primary targets, because they were the work of an antiquarian (*philologus*).

5) Cf. on these points, A. W. J. Holleman, Considerations about the Tomb of the Claudians at Cerveteri, *Historia* 33 (1984) 504–508, and *id.*, The First Claudian at Rome, *Historia* 35 (1986) 377–378.

6) Rebuffat-Emmanuel, *op. cit.*, 213–214, remarks that Messalina and Agrippina each behaved like Tanaquil.