

He sometimes is identified as Rome's "first clear-cut personality (Oxford Classical Dictionary 246:B)." We know little of his early career for he burst fully formed on the political scene with his highly controversial censorship in 312 BC (he shares the limelight with Cato the Censor, 184 BC, as one of Rome's outstanding censors). Since Rome's final thrust in the conquest of Italy happened in Claudius' lifetime, he clearly was not only a major player in the foundation of Roman greatness but an amazing leader and democratic reformer by the standards of any age.

Claudius was indeed compared later to the Athenians, Cleisthenes and Pericles, who also rose above the narrow restrictions of their aristocrat birth to put forward a more open, democratic vision of society before their people. Unfortunately, the Romans let their oligarchic bias get the better of them (despite efforts by the radical Gracchi brothers 170 years later) and the fragile seed planted by Claudius withered in subsequent generations.

As censor Claudius, without the support of his reactionary colleague, Gaius Plautius, achieved more in this one office than most Romans did in a lifetime.

- A. The First Aqueduct: The Aqua Appia. 11 miles long designed to meet the need for more fresh water in a city bursting with growth.
- B. The First Highway: Via Appia. 132 miles long from Rome to the great city of Capua in the plain of Campania. This road was a military highway meant to secure the recent conquest of the bay of Naples area.
- C. The dissemination of the urban poor and citizen sons of ex-slaves throughout the lightly populated 31 rustic tribal voting blocks of the 35 block Tribal Assembly. A contentious act which was undone by the next censors.
- D. The filling of the Senate with talented sons of liberated slaves--merit not birth being the criterion for selection. Again, undone by later censors.
- E. The minting of some of the first silver Roman coins in Campania to pay for his ambitious projects which emptied the treasury but certainly redistributed public wealth to a wider section of the population (compare this with Pericles' ambitious building projects).

To be added to Claudius' many contentious projects was the backing of his liberated-slave, administrative assistant (scriba), Cnaeus Flavius, who published for the first time the arcane rules of legal procedure (legis actiones) which had been kept from the public by a secretive aristocracy bent on controlling the law in its own interest. As curule aedile, probably the first libertus' son to hold such a post, Flavius was treated with disrespect by the other nobles who disdained his low birth. Obviously Claudius felt differently about such things.

People looking at Claudius' life were perplexed when he publicly disapproved of a law which guaranteed that one of the two annual consulships go to a plebeian and that, by tradition, the other one go to a patrician. Later he also disapproved of setting aside half the state priesthoods for plebeians. Although these stands appear reactionary, they in fact were the expressions of a pure democrat who believed that the people be totally unfettered by artificial restrictions in their choice of the best men, whether patrician or plebeian.

Perhaps the finest moments of this old warrior/politician's life came when in the dark days of defeat during Pyrrhus of Epirus' invasion of south Italy, the ex-censor, now blind (caccus) was led into the senate to make a rousing speech against the principle of making a peace with a foreign enemy on the soil of Italy. A fine orator, he left among his many published apothegms the famous saying "*Faber est suae quisque fortunae*"--"Every man is the architect of his own fortune", an elegant testimony to a man who obviously cherished the idea of merit above all else.