

**scripta 15.4: Suetonius describes how Claudius became emperor**

This text is taken from Suetonius' biography of Claudius, Section 10. As discussed in Chapter 12, Claudius was an unlikely emperor who had been kept away from the public eye and shamed for his physical disabilities. When Caligula was assassinated, Claudius was terrified, no doubt because he realised that, as a blood relative of the previous emperor, he was a potential threat to whoever took power next.

Suetonius reports that when Claudius heard the news of Caligula's assassination, he hid behind a set of curtains. In a surprising turn of events, Claudius was found by a member of the Praetorian Guard, brought under their protection and then hailed as emperor by the soldiers. Suetonius comments that the money Claudius gave to these soldiers established the precedent that future emperors could (and would) buy the support of Rome's soldiers in order to shore up their power in Rome.

Claudius came to power in his fiftieth year, in a rather surprising way. He had been shut out along with the others by Gaius Caligula's assassins and he had retreated into a separate room, which was known as the *Hermæum*. Not long afterwards, terrified by the news of the murder, he had crawled into the nearest window alcove and hidden himself within the curtains. A soldier, running past by chance, caught sight of his feet, realised he was hiding there and dragged him out. Claudius - in fear - fell at the knees of the soldier, but the soldier greeted him as emperor.

After this, the soldier led him to the rest of his division. These men put Claudius in a litter and carried him, wretched and fearful, to their camp. Those who passed him on his way pitied him, thinking that he was an innocent man who was being hauled off for punishment. Claudius was taken inside the camp's defences and spent the night amongst the military guard, slightly more confident than he had been, but with very little optimism even so because the consuls, along with the senate and the urban cohorts had taken up position in the forum and on the Capitoline Hill, ready to declare liberty for all. But, on the next day, the senate had become rather less purposeful through their own weariness and in-fighting and the mob, who were gathered all around, kept demanding that one man take the lead, calling for Claudius by name. Because of this, Claudius let the armed guard swear loyalty to his name and promised them 15,000 sesterces each. He was the first of the Caesars to gain surety about the loyalty of the soldiers by means of a reward given in advance.

- 1) What does Claudius do when he hears that Caligula is dead? How does Suetonius create an unimpressive image of Claudius here?
- 2) Suetonius tells us that Claudius was worried about the prospect that the Roman consuls might declare liberty for all. What do you think this means and what risk might it pose to Claudius as a member of the imperial family?
- 3) Suetonius suggests that the Romans were not really committed to restoring liberty for all: which details from the passage show this?
- 4) How does Suetonius highlight the Praetorian Guard's power? Give as many details from the text as you can to support your answer.