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CLAUDIUS' HOUSEBOAT

In the first months of 44 CE, the Roman emperor Claudius, after spending as few as sixteen days in Britain, returned to Rome to celebrate his triumph. On his journey back to Rome, he stopped near the mouth of the Po river to take a cruise, as Pliny the Elder describes:

> The Po is carried to Ravenna by the Canal of Augustus; this part of the river is called the Padusa, formerly called the Messanicus. Nearby it forms the large harbour Vatrenus; from here Claudius Caesar, when celebrating his triumph over Britain, sailed out into the Adriatic, in what was more a *domus* than a ship.[1]

Pliny describes a vessel that was less a boat than a floating *domus*, a somewhat ambiguous word which denotes a structure ranging in size from a modest house to a palace. The cruise, like his time in Britain, was short, and yet this cruise was a part of meticulously planned campaign, a campaign not just for conquest but also for Claudius' reputation. Aulus Plautius, the experienced commander and suffect consul of 29 CE, had been sent ahead with the army, and Claudius' freedman Narcissus was also on hand to oversee the invasion.[2] The Roman army achieved initial successes and then halted until the emperor could arrive to command the final assault on the stronghold at Camulodunum (Colchester).[3] While Claudius only spent around two weeks in Britain, his journey to and from the island took six months.[4] Claudius travelled to Britain with a huge entourage, including senators, relatives, and even elephants.[5] This was a mammoth undertaking, and one that seems to have very carefully planned, to ensure military

[1] Pliny *HN* 3.119: *Augusta fossa Ravennam trahitur ubi Padusa vocatur quondam Messanicus appellatus. proximum inde ostium magnitudinem portus habet qui Vatreni dicitur, qua Claudius Caesar e Britannia triumphans praegrandi illa domo verius quam nave intravit Hadriam*. The Latin text and translation are those of H. Rackham, *Pliny. Natural History* (Cambridge, 1942).

[2] Cass. Dio 60.19.1. On Plautius' career, see A. Birley, *The Roman Government of Britain* (Oxford, 2005), 17–25; A. Birley, *The Fasti of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 37–40.

[3] Cass. Dio 60.21.1–2.

[4] Cass. Dio 60.23.1.

[5] Cass. Dio 60.21.2.

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success and a positive reputation for a new emperor of still uncertain legitimacy.

Given the importance of Claudius' invasion of Britain for his reign, his short river cruise on his return from Britain merits further exploration. Was it planned? If so, how far in advance were preparations made? Were there precedents for this type of voyage? Why was the cruise made on the Po river, far within Roman territory? What did the cruise signify?

Ravenna

As for Claudius' floating *domus*, there are no physical remains, and Pliny provides the only literary evidence. Pliny gives few details on the construction or design of the ship, but he does provide a precise location for the cruise, unsurprising given the placement of this section within a larger description of the Po river system.

The emperor chose to sail into the Adriatic on the Padusa (also called the *fossa Augusta*, or Augustan canal), a waterway built under Augustus and which is to be identified either with the Padenna, a branch of the Po transformed into a canal under Augustus and attested archaeologically, or – less likely – a separate and as yet undiscovered canal built to supplement the Padenna.[6] The Padenna itself was part of system of canals built to facilitate transit through the marshes and lagoons of the Po delta, and the canal was an impressive construction that seems to fit the importance given to the Padusa in literary sources.[7] The Padenna was 50–65 metres wide for the section running alongside the walls of Ravenna, and for that stretch it was accompanied by a 9-metre-wide paved road, most likely the Via Popilia, which ran north from Ariminium (Rimini) around the coast of the Adriatic to Altinum (Quarto d'Altino) and Aquileia.[8]

The harbour that Claudius sailed into had been an important naval station since at least 39 BCE, when Octavian was stationing and building

[6] On the Padenna, see E. Cirelli, *Ravenna. Archeologia di una città* (Borgo San Lorenzo, 2011), 21–3; D. Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2008), 27–8; A. Maglieri, 'Ravenna: il percorso del Canale Lamisa', in L. Quilici e S. Quilici Gigli (eds.), *Spazi, forme e infrastrutture dell'abitare* (Rome, 2008), 54–5; and M. G. Maioli, 'Vie d'acqua e stutture portuali di Ravenna romana', in M. Mauro (ed.), *Ravenna Romana* (Ravenna, 2001), 219–20.

[7] F. Fabbi, 'Ravenna romana nelle ricostruzioni storiche grafiche e cartografiche', in Mauro (n. 6), 107–9; M. David, *Eternal Ravenna. From the Etruscans to the Venetians* (Milan, 2013), 18–19.

[8] Cirelli (n. 6), 28.

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triremes there), and since sometime between 35 and 12 BCE it had been one of the Roman state's two main naval bases, the other being at Misenum on the Bay of Naples.[9] Augustus enlarged and rebuilt the harbour; it was possibly during this phase of construction that a lighthouse was built at the entrance to the harbour, a lighthouse that Pliny describes as similar to those at Alexandria and Ostia.[10] The exact date for the construction of the lighthouse is unknown but, based on Pliny's description, it must pre-date the mid-first century CE, and so the best contexts for its construction would be either under Augustus or under Claudius in the context of his triumphal entry into the Adriatic.

In the first two centuries CE, the harbour facilities at Ravenna underwent three phases of construction: (1) the initial Augustan era construction of oak beams, which (2) was reinforced in the first century CE with ceramic fragments, and then (3) either a Trajanic or Hadrianic phase in which the port materials were replaced with bricks.[11] The construction of a major project like a lighthouse fits most easily with the Augustan phase but, regardless of when the lighthouse was built, Ravenna was exceptionally important in its status as a naval base and was ornamented accordingly.

The naval connection might partially explain why Claudius chose to sail down this particular canal, rather than make a triumphal cruise up the Tiber or down the Thames. Ravenna's naval status allowed him to pay his respects to the fleet, while sailing into a harbour largely built by Augustus allowed Claudius to emphasize the accomplishments of the imperial family at the same time as reinforcing the connection between himself and Augustus. In 42, Claudius started work on the harbour of Ostia; having part of his itinerary dramatically routed through another harbour – one with important connections to Augustus – could legitimize and emphasize the enormously expensive work that he was starting at Ostia.[12]

Yet another advantage of Ravenna was its relative proximity to the southern terminus of the Via Claudia Augusta, the road being built over the Brenner Pass.[13] Work on the road had been started under

[9] App. *B Civ.* 5.78, 80; Suet. *Aug.* 49.
[10] Pliny *HN* 36.83.
[11] Maioli (n. 6), 220.
[12] J. Osgood, *Claudius Caesar. Image and Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2011), 184–7.
[13] *CIL* V 8003.

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Augustus, who delegated work to Claudius' father, Drusus. Claudius' completion of the road not only eased transit between the Po plain and southern Germany but was also an act of familial devotion, both to his father and to Augustus.[14] It is possible that, on his way back from Britain, Claudius took time to made a ceremonial inspection, particularly if he took the Via Postumia rather than the Via Aemilia east across northern Italy.[15] The inclusion of Ravenna on his itinerary back from Britain thus allowed the new emperor to present himself as following the precedents set by both Augustus and his father – as harbour-builder, road-builder, and *triumphator*.

This was a stop that Claudius had perhaps planned as early as 42 or 41. The extravagance of the ship suggests a new construction or at least an extensive refurbishment of an existing ship. In either case, advance planning of at least several months would have been needed. Early planning is further suggested by a series of monuments built in Ravenna for the emperor. The most conspicuous of these is the Porta Aurea, the gate through which the Via Popilia entered the city and connected with the *cardo maximus*.[16] The gate bears an inscription whose imperial titulature dates the structure to 42 CE.[17] The gate had architectural decoration referencing the *corona civica* ('civic crown') granted to Augustus and in January 42 to Claudius.[18] If Claudius had been considering a stop at Ravenna during the initial planning for the British campaign, the gift of a city gate to Ravenna might have been a way to suitably embellish the city in time for his triumphal return.

Hellenistic precedents

The choice of Ravenna as the location of the cruise helped Claudius link himself to Augustus, but, for the triumphal cruise itself, Claudius was following in a tradition far older than Augustus. In the Hellenistic world, rival monarchs had vied to build increasingly elaborate royal ships. Hiero II, King of Syracuse, built a famous ship-palace

[14] B. Levick, *Claudius* (New Haven, CT, 1990), 143.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *CIL* XI 5. On the gate, see E. La Rocca, 'Claudio a Ravenna', *La Parola del Passato* 47 (1992), 269–74.
[17] *CIL* XI 5.
[18] La Rocca (n. 16), 272–4.

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also described at length by Athenaeus (quoting Moschion).[19] It was ostensibly a ship built for carrying grain, but it had promenades, a gymnasium, arbours of ivy and grapes, a reading room, a bath with copper tubs, ten stables, a seawater fish tank sealed with lead, paintings, statues, the entire narrative of the *Iliad* done in mosaics, and a temple to Aphrodite. This, possibly the most elaborate grain transport ever built, Hiero originally named the *Syracusia* but had it renamed the *Alexandris* after it sailed, which was appropriate since he sent it as a gift to the Egyptian king Ptolemy III.[20]

Not to be outdone by the Syracusans, Ptolemy's successor built *Thalamegos*, a similarly ornate floating palace. Like the *Syracusia*, the *Thalamegos* of Ptolemy IV exists only in literary description, in this case that of Callixenus of Rhodes.[21] This riverboat had the façade of a Macedonian palace, with a colonnaded deck just above the water level and an enclosed second storey, the latter containing dining rooms and a temple to Aphrodite, a deity closely associated with Ptolemaic queens.[22] For Ptolemy IV, the *Thalamegos* also provided a Hellenistic update on the older pharaonic practice of sailing in royal barges.

The construction of these large Hellenistic showpieces mirrored a naval arms race between the dynasts of the eastern Mediterranean, in which progressively bigger galleys were constructed.[23] The largest ships of the fourth century were 'sixes', but by the early third century there were 'elevens', 'twelves', and 'thirteens' in Hellenistic navies.[24] The Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt built even larger ships: Ptolemy II

[19] Ath. 5.207–9. On Moschion the paradoxographer, see *FGrHist* 575. This Moschion is not to be confused with Moschion the tragic poet or Moschion the medical writer.

[20] Ath. 5.209a.

[21] Ath. 5.204–5. On the *Thalamegos*, see M. Pfrommer, *Alexandria. Im Schatten der Pyramiden* (Mainz, 1999), 93–120; and F. Caspari, 'Das Nilschiff Ptolemaios IV', *Jahrbuch Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 31 (1916), 1–74.

[22] M. Pfrommer, 'Roots and Contacts: Aspects of Alexandrian Craftsmenship', in *Alexandria and Alexandrianism. Papers Delivered at a Symposium Organized by The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities and Held at the Museum, April 22–25, 1993* (Malibu, CA, 1996), 179; A. Kropp, *Images and Monuments of Near Eastern Dynasts, 100 BC–AD 100* (Oxford, 2013), 103–4.

[23] The evidence for the 'Big Ship Phenomenon' of the Hellenistic era is surveyed by D. Thompson, 'Hellenistic Royal Barges', in K. Buraselis, M. Stefanou, and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Ptolemies, the Sea and the Nile* (Cambridge, 2013), 185–6; W. Murray, *The Age of Titans* (Oxford, 2012), 143–207; and W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Military and Naval Developments* (Cambridge, 1930).

[24] Murray (n. 23), 267–82. The exact arrangement of oarsmen on 'sixes' is unclear, and possibilities include two rows of three rowers or three rows of two rowers.

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had at least one 'twenty' and two 'thirties', while Ptolemy IV built the 'forty'.[25] During this 'Big Ship Phenomenon', ships were designed to be used as floating siege towers, but they were also displays of wealth, particularly larger ships like Ptolemy IV's double-prowed 'forty', which was decorated all over with Dionysiac symbols such as *thyrsoi* and ivy leaves.[26] This ship was more ornate than practical, but it nevertheless served to underscore both the military might of the fleet's other large ships and the economic power that funded those ships. In this context, even non-military large ships had military undertones, and both Hiero II and Ptolemy IV were making statements about their naval and economic power via the *Thalamegos* and *Syracusia*. Implicit naval threat and maritime luxury were intertwined in the behemoths of Hellenistic dynasts.

Roman precedents

The large ships of Hellenistic kings were desirable spoils, and by the second century BCE the Roman general Aemilius Paullus used one of these captured ships as part of a triumphal journey up the Tiber following his Macedonian campaign.[27] Livy describes the event:

> In Rome first the captive kings, Perseus and Gentius, were placed in custody with their children, next the horde of other prisoners, and after them the Macedonians who had been ordered to come to Rome, and the leaders of Greece, for these men too had not only been summoned when at home, but if any of them were reported as being at the courts of the kings, they had also been sought out by letter. After a few days, Paulus himself sailed up the Tiber to the city in a royal galley of immense size, which was driven by sixteen banks of oars, and decorated with the spoils of Macedonia, not only splendid armour, but also royal fabrics. The banks were lined with the crowd which had poured out to welcome him.[28]

In this case, however, Aemilius Paullus' river journey was more of a Roman triumph than a Hellenistic display of naval power. The

[25] Ath. 5.203d–204b, *OGI* 39.
[26] Ath. 5.203e–204b.
[27] Plut. *Vit. Aem.* 31.1; Livy 45.35.
[28] Livy 45.35: *Romam primum reges captivi, Perseus et Gentius, in custodiam cum liberis abducti, dein turba alia captivorum, tum quibus Macedonum denuntiatum erat ut Romam venire, principumque Graeciae; nam ii quoque non solum praesentes excite erant, sed etiam, qi qui apud reges esse dicebantur, litteris arcessiti sunt. Paulus ipse post dies paucos regia nave ingentis magnitudinis, quam sedecim versus remorum agebant, ornate Macedonicis spoliis non insignium tantum armorum, sed etiam rregiorum textilium, adverso Tiberi ad urbem est subvectus, completis ripis obviam effuse multitudine*. The Latin text and translation are those of A. Schlesinger, *Livy* (Cambridge, 1951).

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captured ship was part of war booty and paraded to Rome like a captive. But, rather than establish a new practice for Roman appropriation of these large ships, Aemilius Paullus' use of Perseus' ship seems to have been an anomaly.

We find few other cases of Romans using large and luxurious forms of naval transport in the Republic. C. Iulius Caesar famously sailed with Cleopatra VII on her state barge up the Nile in the spring of 47 BCE.[29] Here, however, the political advantage was Cleopatra's. The Nile cruise was a chance for the Ptolemaic queen to display her own power – and advertise her new Roman ally – to a country only just unified after civil war.[30] Cleopatra's voyage up the Nile followed not only the Hellenistic precedents set by her Ptolemaic ancestors but also older Egyptian customs, in which royal barges and ritual Nile journeys were elemental parts of Egyptian kingship.[31] Cleopatra used elaborate royal barges for ceremonial and diplomatic purposes throughout her reign.[32]

It is not until Claudius' own predecessor, Caligula, that we see Roman ships on the scale and model of the *Thalamegos* and the *Syracusia*. Caligula had a collection of elaborately furnished ships, among which were the two Roman barges recovered from the bottom of Lake Nemi south of Rome. Although discovered in the fifteenth century, they were not fully excavated until the twentieth century.[33] The larger of the two ships was 73 metres long, the shorter 70 metres, and both were outfitted luxuriously.[34] In addition to the Nemi ships, there were the coastal yachts described by Suetonius:

He also built Liburnian galleys with ten banks of oars, with sterns set with gems, multicolored sails, huge spacious baths, colonnades, and banquet-halls, and even a great

[29] Suet. *Caes.* 52.1; App. *B. Civ.* 2.90. T. Hillard, 'The Nile Cruise of Cleopatra and Caesar', *CQ* 52 (2002), 549–54, urges caution in interpreting Suetonius and Appian as giving precise descriptions of the barge in which Cleopatra and Caesar sailed.

[30] On Caesar and Cleopatra's voyage as a traditional Ptolemaic reunification cruise, see W. Clarysse, 'The Ptolemies Visiting the Egyptian Chora', in L. Mooren (ed.), *Politics, Administration and Society in the Hellenistic and Roman World. Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Bertinoro 19–24 July 1997* (Leuven, 1997), 37.

[31] On Caesar and Cleopatra's voyage as a traditional reunification cruise, see W. Clarysse, 'The Ptolemies visiting the Egyptian chora', in L. Mooren (ed.), *Politics, Administration and Society in the Hellenistic and Roman world. Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Bertinoro 19–24 July 1997* (Leuven 1997), 37.

[32] Thompson (n. 23), 186.

[33] J. McManamon, *Caligula's Barges and the Renaissance Origins of Nautical Archaeology under Water* (College Station, TX, 2016), 1–2.

[34] A. Barrett, *Caligula. The Corruption of Power* (London, 2002), 201–2.

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variety of vines and fruit trees; that on board of them he might recline at table from an early hour, and coast along the shores of Campania amid songs and choruses.[35]

Caligula seems thus to have had a fleet of ships emulating the large pleasure ships of the Hellenistic age. Later writers like Suetonius used these ships as examples of a demented emperor's profligacy, but for Caligula, like the Hellenistic dynasts before him, these floating palaces were a means for demonstrating not just wealth but also mastery over the waters.

Claudius was no doubt aware of all three precedents and was likely aware too of the perils in emulating the pleasure cruises of Caligula. The new emperor avoided these perils by placing his Po river trip in the context of military campaign and triumph and thus ensuring that his voyage called back to that of Aemilius Paullus and not to Caesar or Caligula. While not the ship of a captured monarch, Claudius' boat was part of an extended triumph, one whose importance was heightened by allusions to Paullus' victories in the Third Macedonian War.

Waters and borders

Furthermore, Claudius placed this particular cruise within a larger triumphal and imperial programme that showcased conquered waterways, crossed natural obstacles, and expanded borders. Throughout the 40s and particularly in the first few years of his reign, Claudius surrounded himself with symbols of crossed boundaries and extended borders, symbols that referenced his crossing of the English Channel. For example, he received a naval crown on his house as a symbol, according to Suetonius, of a traversed and dominated ocean.[36] Just as his sack of Camulodunum was re-created in the Campus Martius at Rome, the extension of borders was re-enacted at home in his extension of the sacred boundary of Rome, the *pomerium*.[37] Claudius' enlargement of the *pomerium* is documented in no fewer than 139 surviving boundary

[35] Suet. *Gaius* 37.2: *Fabricavit et deceris Liburnicas gemmates puppibus, versicoloribus velis, magna thermarum et porticuum et tricliniorum laxitate magnaque etiam vitium et pomiferarum arborum varietate; quibus discumbens de die inter choros ac symphonias litora Campaniae peragraret.* The Latin text and translation are those of J. Rolfe, *Suetonius* (Cambridge, MA, 1970).

[36] Suet. *Claud*. 17.3.

[37] Suet. *Claud*. 21.6 describes his presentation in the Campus Martius of the siege and storming of a town.

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stones (*cippi*).[38] One of these inscribed boundary markers (*CIL* VI 31537a) gives expanded borders ('with the boundaries of the Roman people having been extended') as a reason for the expansion of the *pomerium*.[39]

This imagery crosses even into Claudius' oratory. His speech to the Senate about the admission of nobles from Gallia Comata into the Senate explicitly glorifies the geographic expansion of citizenship and the Senate. Claudius equates this expansion with his own feats of 'having extended the empire beyond the ocean' (*pro/lati imperi ultra oceanum*) and having 'gone past the borders of the provinces that are regular and familiar to you' (*egressus adsuetos familiaresque vobis pro/vinciarum terminos sum*).[40]

The imagery of tamed waters, too, would be continued throughout Claudius reign, in public works projects focused on harbour-building, lake-draining, and aqueduct construction, all of which helped extend the glory of his one triumph and only major military expedition. Similarly, his road-building over the Alps not only honoured his father's accomplishments but also symbolized the bridging of an otherwise formidable obstacle, and along these lines a milestone from Feltre commemorates 'the Alps having been opened up by war'.[41] His road projects traversing the central Apennines, the Via Claudia Valeria and the Via Claudia Nova, likewise demonstrated a crossed and subdued obstacle. So did the road built through the territory of Tergeste and connecting Italy with the Balkan peninsula.[42]

Claudius' voyage near Ravenna showcased mastery over the ocean and, by virtue of its location near the former Late Republican boundary between Italy and Cisalpine Gaul, contained an antiquarian reference to expanded Roman borders. The voyage thus fitted into a coherent set of benefactions, speeches, and images that constantly referenced his British campaign, either directly or more subtly through symbols of expanded borders and subdued natural boundaries.

[38] For representative *cippi*, see *CIL* VI 31537a, *CIL* VI 1231b (= 31537b), *CIL* VI 1231c (= 31537c), *CIL* VI 1231a (= 31537d). Claudius' extension of the *pomerium* is also attested by Aulus Gellius (13.14.7) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 12.24).

[39] *auctis populi Romani finibus pomerium*.

[40] *CIL* VIII 1668 = Dessau, *ILS* 212.

[41] *Alpibus bello patefactis*: *CIL* V 8002 = Dessau, *ILS* 208.

[42] *CIL* V 698 = Dessau, *ILS* 5889.

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Conclusions

Claudius' ship-*domus*, which he sailed down the fossa Augusta into a port built by Augustus, allowed him to use an established Hellenistic precedent to re-enact his crossing of the English Channel. It also allowed him to present himself as expanding the boundaries of the Roman empire and as a worthy successor to Augustus, succeeding him as the Numa to Augustus' Romulus – a succession he explicitly points out in the Lyons inscription and which, given the mythical Sabine origins of both Numa and the Claudii, forms an appropriate model for Claudius. His cruise at Ravenna was not an eccentric detour but a carefully planned part of a mutually reinforcing set of benefactions and acts that created a coherent, triumphal image for the first years of his reign.

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