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The Problems with Claudius' Missing Ascension in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*

Following a profoundly degrading death, the Roman emperor Claudius arrives in heaven in Seneca's Apocolocyntosis*, expecting deification like his predecessors Augustus and Tiberius. Yet after a brief consultation, the gods reject him and instead banish him to the underworld. But how did Claudius ascend to heaven in the first place? The text is completely silent on this essential part of his journey. This paper discusses and contextualises the four theories hitherto proposed, especially in light of the lacuna between chapters 7 and 8, as well as the question of whether Claudius was aware of his ascension, and further develops these ideas with original considerations.*[1]

Keywords: Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*, Menippean satire, Claudius, Hercules, ascension.

In Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, it must have caused quite a stir in heaven when the divine inhabitants were suddenly approached by a strange figure, limping and resembling more a monster than a man. It was none other than the recently deceased Emperor Claudius. Hercules is sent out to uncover the stranger's identity, a task he accomplishes only with

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difficulty, which may explain his failure to question how Claudius came to be in heaven in the first place. This paper aims to explore this question, which is conspicuously unaddressed in the Menippean satire. To understand the problems surrounding this missing ascension, a closer look at the text is necessary:

Although chapters 3 and 4 provide an extended account of Claudius' prolonged dying, death is granted to him only after Mercury takes pity on him and obtains permission from the Parcae for him to die. His last words were: *Vae me, puto, concacavi me* (4, 3),[2] to which the narrator adds the remark: *quod an fecerit, nescio: omnia certe concacavit* (ibid.).[3] Immediately afterwards, the scene changes, and the narrator gives a general overview: *Quae in terris postea sint acta supervacuum est referre. Scitis enim optime, nec periculum est ne excidant memoriae quae gaudium publicum impresserit: nemo felicitatis suae obliviscitur. In caelo quae acta sint audite: fides*[4] *penes auctorem erit* (5, 1).[5] Subsequently, we are informed that Jupiter learns of a strange figure standing at heaven's door, speaking only unintelligible words – none other than Claudius himself. This indicates that, up to that point, the text provides no account of how the newly deceased emperor ascended to heaven. He also does not seem to know where he is, because when Hercules approaches him, addressing him with a Homeric verse to ascertain his identity, Claudius is delighted that the humans are philologists in the place he has now come to (*illic philologos homines*, 5, 4), even though Hercules greets him armed with

[2] 'Woe is me, I think I've shat myself!' All translations are my own.
[3] 'Whether he did that, I don't know. What I do know is that he shat all over everything.'
[4] This *fides* was first mentioned in 1, 2 as *Appiae viae curator* ('warden of the Via Appia') and the narrator's primary source of the events following Claudius' death.
[5] 'What then happened on earth is superfluous to tell, for you know it best, and there is no danger that the public joy that was impressed upon us fades from memory: No one forgets their happiness. But listen to what has happened in heaven: My warrantor vouches for it.'

a club (7, 2, vers. 2; 3). In this context, it is important to note that the modern perception of heaven stands in stark contrast to that of antiquity, where heaven is rarely described, while the underworld is more commonly portrayed as the dwelling place of the dead.[6]

The *Apocolocyntosis* offers no indication of how heaven should be imagined, suggesting that Claudius is unable to distinguish between heaven and earth at that moment. It seems he was unaware of his journey to heaven, otherwise, he would likely mention it in the surviving text. Nor is it clear from his behaviour towards Hercules and Febris that Claudius knows where he is or who is facing him; for when Febris appears shortly afterwards and insults Claudius as a Gaul of the worst kind (6, 1), he throws a tantrum and orders, as if addressing one of his praetorians, to have Febris executed (6, 2). However, he not only ascended to heaven unaccompanied, but would also commit a grave offence against the gods by attempting to kill one of them – an act rendered absurd by their immortality. Only afterwards does Claudius seem to realise where he is, as Hercules turns to him very aggressively to reprimand him (7, 1). In doing so, Hercules at least indirectly reveals his identity, as he mentions his club (7, 2, vers. 2; 3), a common attribute of the god, and alludes to one of his Twelve Labours, the theft of the giant Geryon's herd of cattle (7, 2, vers. 6–8). Subsequently, Claudius adopts a markedly more amiable tone and refers to Hercules as his warrantor (7, 4). At this point, however, the surviving text breaks off, and it remains unclear how much has been lost. The narrative resumes when a deity of unknown identity delivers a speech opposing Claudius' apotheosis (8). In the meantime, Claudius appears to have persuaded Hercules to support his cause, although there is no mention of deification prior to the lacuna, making it unclear who first introduced the idea. At the meeting of the gods, Hercules attempts to rally support from various deities (9, 5). But

[6] Cf. Lichtenberger (2021: 46–48), Berdozzo (2011: 113–114).

before that, they must have entered heaven, probably by force, because the unknown deity refers to this as *impetum* (8, 1), and Hercules must have proposed that Claudius should be deified. Theoretically, it would also be conceivable that the narrator refrained from describing Claudius' ascension because the emperor now reports it himself, although this contradicts his earlier lack of awareness.

The surviving text provides relatively little information about how Claudius reached heaven; it is only known that he left Rome on the Via Appia limping, as Augustus and Tiberius had already done when they were deified (1, 2), and that he approached heaven's door still limping (5, 2). The narrator does not explicitly name the place of death, but Claudius' palace on the Palatine Hill appears to be the most plausible location. This is supported by the historians, who suggest that he died there,[7] and by Febris, who later alludes to the site (6, 1). However, if Claudius had intended to reach the entrance to the underworld, he would have needed to proceed in the opposite direction, northwest toward the Field of Mars, where he and Mercury later descend into the underworld (13, 1), rather than heading southeast on the Via Appia. The question therefore arises as to where Claudius tried to go, i.e. whether he knew that he would encounter an opportunity to ascend to heaven on the Via Appia and be deified there, even if he does not seem to remember that in heaven.

On this subject, Cassius Dio includes two amusing anecdotes at the very point where Seneca's authorship and the title *Apocolocyntosis* are mentioned for the only time in antiquity, offering insight into how Claudius' contemporaries envisioned his ascension:

> ἐπειδὴ γὰρ τοὺς ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ θανατουμένους ἀγκίστροις τισὶ μεγάλοις οἱ δήμιοι ἕς τε τὴν ἀγορὰν ἀνεῖλκον κἀντεῦθεν ἐς

[7] Cf. Levick (1990: 77).

> τὸν ποταμὸν ἔσυρον, ἔφη (sc. ὁ τοῦ Σενέκα ἀδελφὸς Γαλλίων) τὸν Κλαύδιον ἀγκίστρῳ ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνενεχθῆναι. καὶ ὁ Νέρων δὲ οὐκ ἀπάξιον μνήμης ἔπος κατέλιπε· τοὺς γὰρ μύκητας θεῶν βρῶμα ἔλεγεν εἶναι, ὅτι καὶ ἐκεῖνος διὰ τοῦ μύκητος θεὸς ἐγεγόνει (61, 35, 4).[8]

While Gallio denounces Claudius as a criminal, Nero is reported to have mocked his predecessor by endorsing the claim, already made earlier by Cassius Dio (61, 34, 2–3), that Claudius had been poisoned by Agrippina. Nero allegedly elaborated on this idea by describing the grotesque method of Claudius' ascension to heaven: propelled by flatulence induced by poisonous mushrooms, he was catapulted into heaven like a projectile.

Remarkably, the question of how Claudius reached heaven has been largely neglected in modern scholarship; only four attempts to explain this phenomenon exist, all of which differ significantly: First, Otto Weinreich attempted to downplay the absent ascension scene by claiming that Seneca, in pursuit of brevity, intentionally omitted a detailed account and limited himself to the simple image of Claudius limping towards heaven.[9] However, Severin Koster has rightly pointed out that, if Seneca had truly aimed to reduce the length of this satire, he could have dispensed with various verse passages, such as the tragedy monologue of Hercules in chapter 7, but he would hardly have omitted something as central as the ascension.[10] This tragic monologue, for example, primarily serves to mock Hercules, suggesting that the description of Clau-

[8] 'Because the public executioners dragged those condemned to death by the court to the forum with certain large hooks and then threw them into the river, Gallio, Seneca's brother, said that Claudius would be dragged to heaven with a hook. Nero, on the other hand, also delivered a memorable remark: He said that mushrooms were the food of the gods because a mushroom made Claudius a god as well.'

[9] Cf. Weinreich (1923: 57).

[10] Cf. Koster (1979: 70–71).

dius' ascension was also used to ridicule him. In this way, Seneca can subvert the dignity expected of an emperor, by depicting this ascension in vivid and humiliating detail. Moreover, Claudius' return to earth, accompanied by Mercury, is described simply as a descent (*descendunt*, 12, 1), which suggests that his descent followed the same route as his ascension. Otherwise, the text would imply a deviation from the previous path, yet none appears.

In response to Weinreich's arguments, Richard Heinze has suggested that Seneca himself did not quite know how to organise Claudius' ascension, since otherwise, it would have been the gods who had summoned an emperor to heaven for an apotheosis. This is not the case in this instance, as they are surprised when Claudius appears on their doorstep and they ultimately refuse to deify him. For this reason, Seneca created the following juxtaposition: *Quae in terris postea sint acta... In caelo quae acta sint…* at the beginning of the scene in heaven (5, 1), as he could thus conceal what had happened between earth and heaven, and omit the ascension.[11] However, Weinreich's analysis, as referenced by Heinze, cites two other texts that resemble this passage in the *Apocolocyntosis* as they depict scenarios of ascension: Aristophanes' *Peace*, in which the Attic winegrower Tyrgaios flies into heaven on a giant dung beetle to end the Peloponnesian War, and Lucian's *Icaromenippus*, in which Menippus, the creator of the Menippean satire, flies into heaven with an eagle's wing on one arm and a vulture's wing on the other to gain insight into the nature of the gods.[12] Although *Icaromenippus* was composed several decades after Seneca's death, it likely draws on motifs from Menippean tradition that would have been familiar to Seneca as well. This suggests that the *Apocolocyntosis* could have portrayed Claudius ascending to heaven in a similarly absurd manner: He could have been borne by an animal that mirrors his physical or moral

[11] Cf. Heinze (1926: 58).
[12] Cf. Weinreich (1923: 57–59).

shortcomings, such as a limping, winged horse parodying Pegasus, or a giant tortoise symbolizing his sluggishness and incapacity as a ruler. This depiction would align with the satirical tradition, but it still raises the question of why Claudius would regard Hercules as human if he was aware of having ascended on an animal. Another aspect of the literary tradition also becomes apparent here: Both Aristophanes (*Pax* 151) and Lucian (*Icar*. 22) indicate that it took Trygaios and Menippus three days to reach heaven, which raises the possibility that such a duration was considered typical for celestial journeys. This may also help explain why Claudius reappears at his *pompa funebris* during his brief return to earth: The exact date of this event is unknown, but it is generally assumed to have taken place on 18 October, following a five-day period of lying in state, comparable to the funerals of Augustus and Tiberius.[13] If Claudius ascended to heaven for three days immediately following his death, from 13 to 15 October,[14] and, having presumably spent little time there,[15] returned to earth from 16 to 18 October, he could have witnessed his own funeral.

Severin Koster has hypothesised that part of the text was lost not only during Claudius' brief stay in heaven, but also in an earlier pas-

[13] Cf. Levick (1990: 78).

[14] Although Claudius' limp might suggest a longer journey compared with Trygaios and Menippus, who are fully able-bodied, the text merely notes that he limped at the outset of his journey, from the palace to the Via Appia (1, 2), and again upon reaching heaven (5, 2). This implies that his limping probably did not significantly prolong his journey. Since Trygaios and Menippus relied on specific devices for their ascension to heaven, it seems unlikely that Claudius completed the entire journey on foot.

[15] The text does not provide any information about the duration of Claudius' sojourn in heaven. The scene immediately preceding the lacuna can be assumed to have lasted only a few minutes, as Hercules awaits Claudius' arrival and they exchange only a few words. The assembly of the gods likely lasts less than an hour, as it consists of only a few speeches and a vote on deification. Although the lacuna's content remains unknown, it likely covered only a brief period, probably encompassing Claudius' attempt to persuade Hercules to grant him entry to heaven, his petition for deification, and the opening of the gods' assembly. The speech by the unidentified deity is preserved almost in its entirety, as it still addresses Claudius' *impetum* (8, 1), his unauthorised entry into heaven.

sage, between his death and his arrival in heaven.[16] He argued that this double loss was due to the codex being a quaternio, and if one page of it, possibly the one containing Claudius' ascension, was torn out, the other part of the sheet likely became detached and was lost, including the second half of the dialogue between Hercules and Claudius. The removal of the page may have been prompted by a Christian reader who found the description of Claudius' ascension offensive, as it paralleled Jesus' ascension but was attributed to a pagan fool, leading them to tear the page from the codex. Consequently, the depiction of the storming of heaven was also lost, whereas the arrival of Claudius in heaven was preserved because it was written on another leaf of the codex.[17] The second lacuna is particularly conspicuous because it interrupts Claudius' speech and omits the opening of a speech by the unknown deity. However, the first lacuna was much easier to conceal because the previous page probably ended with a sentence and perhaps even concluded a paragraph, allowing the next surviving sentence to follow with relative coherence.

But this consideration raises the question of where exactly the lacuna is located, and Koster did not provide specific details, for the sentences describing the events on earth and in heaven (*Quae in terris... In caelo quae*…, 5, 1) present interpretive difficulties: Although it is plausible that the description of Claudius' death is immediately followed by his ascension to heaven, it is difficult to imagine that the author then shifts back to earth to note the joy expressed there at the emperor's death (*Scitis enim optime*…, ibid.) before focussing on heaven again. It is also doubtful whether the narrator, having just announced that he will report on events in heaven (*In caelo quae*…), turns to Claudius' journey to heaven. It seems unlikely that Claudius departs the earthly realm immediately, only to spend three days exclusively in a space identified as

[16] Cf. Koster (1979: 73).
[17] Cf. Koster (1979: 74–77).

heaven. Tyrgaios (165) and Menippus (11), for instance, describe flying over earthly locations during their ascensions, indicating that they are in flight but have not yet entered heaven. Additionally, Claudius' ascension must have been described in considerable detail: According to Koster's theory, the passage was extensive enough to fill both the front and back of the missing page.[18] This seems plausible, as little narrative content appears to be missing, making it improbable that any other topic was described in detail. The further reference to the narrator's *fides* (*fides penes auctorem erit*, 5, 1), which had already been invoked when Claudius walked across the Via Appia (1, 2), may indicate the beginning of the ascension narrative. It is plausible that the original text, directly before the lacuna, contained a phrase like: 'But listen to what occurred on the way to heaven: My warrantor vouches for it'. However, this became incoherent because the page was lost and the narrative now continues with a report to Jupiter that Claudius is already approaching heaven. Thus, a copyist could have made a small intervention in the text, changing 'on the way to heaven' to 'in heaven', a plausible modification, since it would require only a minor alteration from *in itinere ad caelum* to *in caelo*. This would also explain why the following sentence, *nuntiatur Iovi venisse quendam (…) quaesivisse se cuius nationis esset* (5, 2),[19] is incomplete in several respects: It is syntactically problematic that this passage begins with the passive *nuntiatur*, yet the reflexive *se* refers back to the unnamed messenger, creating a grammatical inconsistency that casts doubt on the textual tradition.[20] Moreover, the passage lacks clarity, as the identity of the messenger reporting Claudius' arrival to Jupiter remains unspecified. Various conjectures have been proposed,

[18] Cf. Koster (1979: 75).
[19] 'Jupiter was informed that someone was approaching (...) and that the messenger had asked what nation they were from.'
[20] Cf. Lund (1994: 77–78).

but none has gained scholarly acceptance.[21] However, if there is a lacuna directly before it, the beginning of this sentence may have been lost, leading to these ambiguities. The main challenge of this interpretation that the contrast between events on earth and in heaven depends on textual emendation, while the juxtaposition of the earth and the journey to heaven is narratively awkward.

Building on earlier scholarship,[22] Andreas Heil referred to the first exchange between Hercules and Claudius, in which the god addresses the emperor with the following Homeric quotation: τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν, ποίη πόλις ἠδὲ τοκῆες; (5, 4),[23] to which Claudius replies: Ἰλιόθεν με φέρων ἄνεμος Κικόνεσσι πέλασσεν (ibid.).[24] This wind may be interpreted as the force that carried Claudius to heaven, specifically the flatulence that escaped loudly from his bowels, while he was dying, as described vividly by the narrator: *Et ille quidem animam ebulliit (…) maiorem sonitum emisisset illa parte* (4, 2–3).[25] His soul was discharged with such force after Claudius' death that he was propelled toward heaven and subsequently approached heaven's door. Interestingly, Claudius states that he came Ἰλιόθεν, from Troy, which serves a pun on the Latin *de ilio*.[26] This joke also echoes Nero's mocking remark, reported by Cassius Dio, that Claudius became a god through a mushroom. It would probably be the best and most scathing joke in the entire *Apocolocyntosis*, because in

[21] Cf. Weinreich (1923: 58), Lund (1994: 77–78).

[22] Athanassakis (1974: 15), Roth (1987: 807), Dobesch (2002: 63–65).

[23] 'Who are you, whence among men do you come, where is your city and who are your kin?' This precise wording does not appear in Homer; instead, a similar line is found: τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν; πόθι τοι πόλις ἠδὲ τοκῆες; (*Od*. 1, 170; 10, 325; 14, 187; 15, 264; 19, 105; 24, 298). Seneca may have misquoted the verse from memory, or the discrepancy may stem from textual transmission errors. Alternatively, Seneca may have deliberately attributed the misquoted words to characterise Hercules as unfamiliar with Homer, whose work he likely knew only vaguely and misrecalled.

[24] 'From Ilios the wind bore me to the Cicones.' Also Hom. *Od*. 9, 39.

[25] 'And he expelled his spirit (...) he let out a rather loud noise from that part of his body.'

[26] 'From the bowels', cf. Heil (2006: 197–199).

this way both Claudius and the idea of deified emperors are derided to an unprecedented degree, while also alluding to the rumour that Claudius was poisoned. However, precisely this fact suggests that Seneca did not intend this ridicule, as we would expect it to be reiterated in several other places, such as at the meeting of the gods, where the deification of Claudius is debated and, for example, the unknown deity denies that Claudius possesses divine qualities (8). The emperor's limp is regularly mocked (1, 2; 5, 2), so we might expect the same to occur with this unique ascension. Furthermore, this raises the question of why Claudius, as we have already seen, initially walked with a limp on the Via Appia before being propelled to heaven, i.e. why he only then experienced this ascension and not during or directly after his death. Finally, a return to earth through flatulence can be ruled out for Claudius and Mercury.

What conclusions, then, can be drawn regarding Claudius' ascension to heaven? Three of the four possibilities can be dismissed with relative certainty: Seneca's deliberate omission of the ascension in order to maintain the satire's conciseness (Weinreich), his inability to shape it (Heinze), or Claudius' rocket-like flight to heaven (Heil). Koster's idea that the ascension was lost but seamlessly integrated into the surviving text, rendering the lacuna nearly imperceptible, is plausible in some respects. However, it raises challenges, particularly in identifying its location. The ascension must be designed to keep Claudius unaware of his destination. If propelled skyward by severe flatulence, he should understand that he is approaching the gods. One might argue that Claudius is so intellectually limited that he fails to grasp this; yet, he subsequently demonstrates greater wit than Hercules by responding to the latter's Homeric quotation with a clever verse that Hercules fails to understand. Moreover, the ascension must also allow for a return journey by a similar route, since Seneca provides no additional information regarding the means of their return.

It is particularly unfortunate that the text breaks off just as Claudius delivers what appears to be his only extended speech in the satire. His concluding words, *Sed quoniam volo* *** (7, 5),[27] hint at an imminent revelation of his intentions. Elsewhere in the *Apocolocyntosis*, the characters speak extensively about Claudius, but he is rarely allowed to speak for himself. Knowledge of the content of the lacuna would greatly enhance our understanding of the satire, particularly regarding whether Claudius himself proposed his deification, which he does not mention in the surviving text. However, it remains unclear how exactly the ascension would have fit into this part of the satire. Claudius cannot recount the ascension himself, as he is unaware of his location. Similarly, it is unlikely that any god would claim to have elevated him to heaven. After all, the deceased emperor has only one advocate: Hercules, who initially intends to attack Claudius with his club but later helps persuade the other gods of his apotheosis. Thus, even Hercules cannot be said to have raised Claudius to heaven. It is conceivable that a comedy of errors occurs, where a god intends to elevate another figure to heaven, as seen with Caesar's ascent on a cloud in the *Metamorphoses*, but mistakenly takes Claudius instead, thus setting the plot in motion. Such mix-ups are common in satirical literature, as seen in the *Menaechmi* by Plautus, in which the two twins are constantly confused with each other. A possible candidate for this confusion could be Marcus Iunius Silanus, the consul in the year 46. Tacitus and Cassius Dio report that he was the first victim of Agrippina following the death of Claudius, as she feared that he, as a great-grandson of Augustus, might become emperor instead of her son, the youthful Nero (Tac. *Ann*. 13, 1, 1–2; D.C. 61, 6, 5). Accordingly, he was poisoned with the same poison that Agrippina had previously administered to Claudius (D.C. 61, 6, 4). It is therefore conceivable that one of the gods orchestrated Silanus' ascension in recognition of his achievements and noble lineage,

[27] 'But because I want ***'.

but Claudius ultimately usurped this role. Caligula's mocking remark about Silanus as a golden sheep (*pecus aurea*, Tac. *Ann*. 13, 1, 1), combined with the Menippean tradition of heavenly ascensions, suggests that the gods sent a literal golden sheep as the vehicle for Silanus' ascension. While walking along the Via Appia for reasons unknown, Claudius may have encountered and mounted the golden sheep, perhaps believing it would expedite his travel, unaware that it would ascend to heaven. In this way, not only the deceased emperor but also Silanus becomes an object of ridicule, as the epithet 'golden sheep' mocks his perceived inactivity.[28] Furthermore, the sheep could serve as the vehicle for Claudius and Mercury's return to earth. Even if this interpretation is accepted, one might still expect an additional reference to Silanus in the *Apocolocyntosis*, for instance, during the Senate meeting in heaven, since presumably one of the gods must have dispatched the golden sheep. Such a reference, however, is conspicuously absent.[29] Thus, the exact nature of Claudius' ascension to heaven and the number of lacunae, whether one or two, remain unclear, as too much essential information is missing or ambiguous, making a definitive solution impossible.

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[28] Cf. Koestermann (1967: 233).

[29] His brother Lucius Iunius Silanus is mentioned twice in connection with an alleged incestuous relationship with his sister (8, 2; 10, 4) while Appius Iunius Silanus, who was executed on the orders of Claudius, appears once (11, 5).

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