

## Claudius, Language and Re-Foundation in Tacitus' *Annals*

Tacitus' account of Claudius' reign (*Annals* 11-12) reveals the emperor's deliberate appropriation of Augustan self-presentation, including his desire to be seen as a new founder of Rome. In the course of his narrative of Claudius' censorship of 47 CE, Tacitus tells us that the emperor invented three new letters of the Roman alphabet (11.13.2). The notice is brief, but frames a digression into the history of the Greek alphabet (11.14). It is my contention that these accounts provide clues about how Claudius attempted to present himself as a foundational figure, and why.

It is well established that Augustus presented himself as a new founder of Rome. Augustus affiliated himself with Romulus and other foundational figures from early Roman history, like Camillus, and his ideological program prominently featured Venus, integral to the founding of Rome, and Apollo, a god associated with the foundation of a number of Greek *poleis*. Diliانا Angelova has recently argued that foundation became an essential part of the legitimization of Hellenistic rulers because the highest honors accorded to mortals in historical time were paid to *oikistai*, and that Augustus in turn looked to the Hellenistic models to create sufficiently Roman ideology of (re-)foundation that helped to explain and legitimize his extraordinary position (2015, 4). Claudius seems to have consciously and systematically recycled many aspects of Augustus' ideological program, and I argue that re-foundation played an especially central role.

Tacitus's portrayal of Claudius on the whole is quite negative, but the effectiveness of his criticism depends in large part on Claudius being read as a failed imitator of Augustus. It is as though whatever Claudius does to call to mind his illustrious predecessor always comes out wrong. By unpacking Tacitus' characterization of Claudius, the emperor's apparently earnest

attempts at legitimizing his rule through affiliation with Augustus become evident. However, it seems that Claudius in some ways sought to outdo his role model. I argue that his intervention in Latin orthography is one such example. Although Tacitus stresses the futility of Claudius' innovation, his account signals the emperor's attempt to associate himself with legendary founders as part of his legitimizing strategy.

Tacitus names individuals, including Cadmus, Cecrops, Linus, Palamedes, Demaratus of Corinth and Evander, who were responsible for improving the Greek alphabet by adding new letters to it. The alphabetic innovators he names are also associated with various foundations. Cadmus is revered as the founder of Thebes, Cecrops of Athens. Linus is a son of Apollo, a prolific founder and important divine patron of Augustus. Palamedes' father is associated with the foundation of Nauplia. Demaratus of Corinth, the father of L. Tarquinius Priscus, is associated with establishing Greek culture in Etruria, and Evander plays a significant role in stories of Rome's origins. However, Tacitus seems to be aligning Claudius' innovations and those of Greek foundational figures in order to emphasize that where Cadmus or Evander succeeded, Claudius came up short. Tacitus' Claudius fails doubly in fashioning himself as a new re-founder—he ends up misperforming both Augustus and Cadmus.

Ultimately, whether Tacitus' account of the history of the alphabet, or of Claudius' reasons for intervening in Latin orthography are accurate or not is beside the point. Tacitus' characterization of Claudius suggests how the emperor presented himself and his legitimacy, and established a model according to which future emperors would explain and justify their reigns.

## Bibliography

Angelova, Diliana. 2015. *Sacred Founders: Women, Men, and Gods in the Discourse of Imperial Founding, Rome through Early Byzantium*. Oakland: University of California Press.