

Chapter 1

# Age, Agency and Disability: Suetonius and the Emperors of the First Century CE

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## Introduction

The emperors of the first century AD appear in our sources as far from perfect, but some of them seem to have been less than perfect rulers, not due to any physical disability, but due to the simple fact that they may have been too old or too young to have performed the role effectively. This observation allows us to consider how age may have been seen to prevent the effective agency of a Roman emperor. This study of age and agency is played out with reference to the emperor Claudius, whose disability affected how he was treated by other members of the imperial family. We will argue that age caused emperors to become unable to act, and if too old to be at risk of being deposed. This is a quite different conception of disability than those previously published in the study of Antiquity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Greco-Roman World* (1995) set the parameters for the subject area with a book length study. Nicholas Vlahogiannis, 'Disabling Bodies', in *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings. Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity*, ed. Dominic Montserrat (1998), 13–54 is a full treatment of the subject and recognizes the role of ageing in the construction of disability in Antiquity with a key focus on establishing a link between disability and social/emotional exclusion from society that included moral and social isolation, as well as political disempowerment. Strangely, this study omits reference to Claudius. James H. Oliver, 'Disability in the Roman Military Lists', *Rheinisches Museum* (1957): 242–4 for discussion of usage of terminology applied to the military. Christian Laes, 'Learning from Silence: Disabled Children in Roman Antiquity', *Arctos* 42 (2008): 85–122 focuses discussion on children and disability. Nicholas Vlahogiannis, 'Curing Disability', in *Health in Antiquity*, ed. Helen King (2005), 180–91 clarifies the shifting discourse and changes associated with Christianity. On Christian writing and disability, see Laes, 'Disabled Children in Gregory of Tours', in *The Dark Side of Childhood in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Unwanted, Disabled and Lost*, eds Katariina Mustakallio and Christian Laes (2011), 39–64.

## Disability and the Life Course

Today, we recognize disability as both a mental and/or physical condition. The 2011 *World Report on Disability* suggests that up to 15 per cent of the human population are disabled with some 50 per cent of the population of the USA experiencing some form of mental disorder at some point in their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, most disabilities are only recognized in adulthood (80 per cent), while less than 10 per cent are recognized prior to the age of one year (9 per cent). This latter statistic is important, when we consider that in Antiquity, a reason for exposing infants was their disability.<sup>3</sup> If most disabilities cannot be recognized prior to the age of one year today, this would suggest that the disabled not only survived and were present in Antiquity but can be found, if we look harder, in classical literature. The emperor Claudius was not exposed at birth perhaps because his disability was not apparent since it was his movement and speech that was impaired, and his twitch or nervous tick developed later. Portraits of Claudius have been studied and identify asymmetry of eye-sockets, neck-muscle and other features as indications of disability.<sup>4</sup> For about 100 years, it has been suggested that Claudius suffered from a form of cerebral palsy – a condition that becomes more apparent six to nine months after birth.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we should not see the disabled as absent from the Roman world, nor consider the examples we know of to be exceptional, assuming others were exposed at birth.

However, as others have suggested, the Roman concept of disability might be quite different to our own and subject to some variation over time.<sup>6</sup> For example, the attitude towards hermaphrodites and bodies that might have been described as ‘different’ or ‘other’ changed from the middle Republic when they were seen as prodigies, to becoming objects of curiosity under the empire.<sup>7</sup> The emperor Galba, who inherited spinal characteristics perhaps similar to those of the English king Richard III, undressed in front of his future wife to ensure she was aware of his crooked spine.<sup>8</sup> This did not cause him to be seen as particularly

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<sup>2</sup> All numbers and figures given here are from: K. Hanson, T. Neuman and S.G. Carlsson, *Understanding the Health Care Needs and Experiences of People with Disabilities* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> William V. Harris, ‘Child Exposure in the Roman Empire’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994): 1–22; compare Laes ‘Learning from Silence’, 92–9.

<sup>4</sup> Elmer G. Suhr, ‘A portrait of Claudius’, *American Journal of Archaeology* 59 (1955): 319–22.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas DeCoursey Ruth, *The Problem of Claudius* (1916), 133–7 – seen as the most satisfactory explanation by Barbara Levick, *Claudius* (1990), 13 with 200 note 7 for further bibliography from the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>6</sup> Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder*, uses a modern legal definition of disability.

<sup>7</sup> Ray Laurence, *Roman Passions* (2009), 141–50; Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 45–58, 67–72.

<sup>8</sup> Suet. *Galba* 3.4.

disabled, since he engaged with public life, commanded soldiers and so on. What caused him to be seen as incapacitated was his age, which created a sense of his own vulnerability to the agency of soldiers in civil war.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Galba's father's spinal impairment was visible and was the source of jokes by the emperor Augustus.<sup>10</sup> This chimes well with the correspondence between Augustus and Livia presented by Suetonius in relation to Claudius' appearance in public and a desire to prevent the young man from being mocked; and with Seneca's satirical criticism of his speech and his body after his death.<sup>11</sup> Here we can identify a discourse that maps onto a modern conception of disability as a 'social category that contributes to the exclusion of and prejudice against people with bodily or cognitive variations'.<sup>12</sup> The exclusion of Claudius occurred because he was categorized as different and, to a certain extent, moulded through exclusion as different. Yet, in our source material the category of his disability is unstated or undefined and a heavy emphasis is placed on the agency of others to influence him, notably his wives and freed slaves.<sup>13</sup> The roles of wives and freedmen is not unique to the reign of Claudius, but can be found articulated in Tacitus' *Agricola* in statements about freedmen in the court of Domitian (41) and his comment that a wife is more than half-responsible for a good or bad marriage (6). The issue at stake is the agency of the emperor in relation to the agency of others, perhaps, most clearly articulated by Plutarch in his lives of Galba and Otho,<sup>14</sup> but also applicable to the biographies of Suetonius: the impact of vice and extravagance on the young Nero, for example, which results in the emperor being powerless to act in the face of Vindex's rebellion.<sup>15</sup> Tacitus takes this idea a stage further in his account of Claudius' principate by creating a narrative in which Claudius' role or even presence is eclipsed by that of Agrippina in order to present a critique of a 'harmless and insignificant' Claudius, whose lack of control provides the

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<sup>9</sup> Plut. *Galba* 8.1, 16.5, see Rhiannon Ash, 'Severed heads. Individual Portraits and Irrational Forces in Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho*', *Plutarch and His Intellectual World*, ed. J. Mosman (1997), 189–214 provides a full analysis of these passages and others referred to in this section of our chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Macrobius *Sat.* 2.4.8.

<sup>11</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 3–4; Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 40–42. See also Susanna Morton Braund and Paula James, 'Quasi homo: Distortion and Contortion in Seneca's *Apocolycynosis*', *Arethusa* 31 (1998): 285–311; Osgood, Josiah, 'The *Vox* and *Verba* of an Emperor: Claudius, Seneca and the Prince Ideal', *The Classical Journal* 102 (2007): 329–53.

<sup>12</sup> Tamar Heller and Sarah Parker Harris, *Disability Through the Life Course* (2012), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina. Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (2006), 22–35 for full analysis of the literary creation of the powerful Agrippina.

<sup>14</sup> Plut. *Galba* 1; Ash, 'Severed Heads'.

<sup>15</sup> Suet. *Nero* 40–44.

context for the emergence of a dangerous evil stepmother and female *dux*.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Tacitus has been shown to use comic techniques to invert power relations in his characterization of Claudius' reign in *Annals* books XI and XII.<sup>17</sup> This makes freedmen and wives the main protagonists with Claudius in a subservient, unknowing or forgetful role. Little of this comic genre crosses into Suetonius' *Claudius*,<sup>18</sup> and creates a need to understand his biography within the wider context of writings on age and agency in Antiquity and, specifically, Suetonius' deployment of age categories in his biographies of the early emperors. The absence of agency on the part of the ruler of the Roman Empire is, for us, a means to understand how 'disability' was perceived in the Roman Empire; and underpinning most conceptions of this absence of agency was the age of the person in question. However, in the case of Claudius, appearance was an important signifier of his character due to his gait and speech. The description of an emperor's appearance at the end of each of Suetonius' lives appears to provide a further proof of their character as described in the earlier accounts of their deeds and sayings. Interestingly, ageing created similar signifiers of the loss of virility and power: Karen Cokayne suggests that the ageing Roman became disabled through failing sight or the presence of baldness. This would suggest that the Roman concept of disability was rather wider than our own and could include elements that were introduced through the ageing process, including physical processes as innocuous as the loss of hair.<sup>19</sup>

## Conceptions of the Stages of the Human Lifespan

In Antiquity the concept that the human lifespan was split up into a number of quite distinct stages was well-developed, comprising numerous mathematical divisions. Tim Parkin has examined all of the schemes and sees them as having little basis in or on actual biological and human experience, but served instead as a powerful literary *topos* (see Table 1.1).<sup>20</sup> This idea can be extended further and, we might suggest, the articulation was a means to identify the strengths and weaknesses associated with the age of others, which could have a practical value for the writing of rhetorical speeches. The schemes and their divisions that articulated perceptions of the qualities and weaknesses of each stage of life are set out as Table 1.1. Of course, there were exceptional individuals who demonstrated that they could both contribute to public life and live well –

<sup>16</sup> Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 22–32.

<sup>17</sup> Sheila K. Dickison, 'Claudius: Saturnalicus Princeps', *Latomus* 36 (1977): 634–47.

<sup>18</sup> Apart from at Suet. *Claud.* 29, discussed by Dickison 'Claudius', 645–6.

<sup>19</sup> K. Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age* (2003), 12–15.

<sup>20</sup> Tim Parkin, 'Life Cycle', in *A Cultural History of Childhood and Family in Antiquity*, eds Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence (2010), 97–114.

whilst facing up to the negative connotations of old age. One very clear example was Appius Claudius Caecus, who was both old and blind but appears as a key character Cicero's *De Senectute*.<sup>21</sup> The view of the stages of the human lifespan point to a concept by which man (these do not apply to women) gained in ability or the capacity to understand and to act wisely. This process reached a tipping point at some stage in adulthood, after which deterioration into old age was an expectation. It is in middle-age that we find the greatest capacity to act. In the discussion of systems of age with a focus on multiples of seven, this results in the age of 42 – incidentally the age at which Trajan was said to have become emperor: an ideal age. This point, in a man's early 40s, can be seen as either a transition moment to a new stage in the lifespan (cf. Solon's and Ptolemy's categorizations) or is found at the end of the phase associated with terms such as *iuventus* or *iuuenis*. In such schemes, 42 was seen as a conclusion to the maturation of the individual and the transition into the later stages of life. If those at the age of about 42 had the greatest capacity to act, then those at an earlier age or a later age were seen to have less of a capacity to take action.

Although Parkin argues that these schemes that divide the lifespan into phases were literary devices or *topoi*, there is similarity if not congruence with Roman cultural practices.<sup>22</sup> This is evident not least in the Roman sense of the *mos maiorum* that systematically excluded the young from power and developed a conception of the youngest point at which a man might progress to the office of consul.<sup>23</sup> The progression through the various magistracies at the fastest, yet legal, pace was used by Cicero to announce his ability to act and was combined with his worth as a *novus homo* to achieve esteem. This also plays on the fact that as a *novus homo* (new man), some may have regarded him as less able than those with prestigious and noble ancestors and thus Cicero overcomes both social disadvantage and social prejudice.<sup>24</sup> That this social disadvantage can then be turned into a merit points to the complex way in which merit of a person was created through naming prejudices against them. The way the *mos maiorum* maps onto the various stages of life in Table 1.1 (below, p. 27) is worth consideration and shows that the age of 25 in the Augustan Empire (earliest office holding) and also the earliest age at which men were expected to be married under the *Lex Papia Poppaea*, simply does not appear.<sup>25</sup> The absence of 25 reveals more about the Augustan recalibration of age than about the age schemes and should only be understood within the social realm of elite politics and the role of the elite in the new Augustan *res publica* (republic). Unlike the young Octavian in

<sup>21</sup> Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age*, 93–104.

<sup>22</sup> Parkin, 'Life Cycle'.

<sup>23</sup> For discussion and references see Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome – A Life Course Approach* (2002), 104–16.

<sup>24</sup> Cic. *Leg. Agr.* 2.3–4.

<sup>25</sup> Dio 52.42.

44 BC, those under the age of 25 from 27 BC onwards were to have a limitation placed upon their role in the *res publica* due to their age; a limitation that was justified with reference to Roman law regarding the agency of those under 25 to undertake business transactions. Effectively, these laws reflected a prejudice and ensured the young men would not gain access to the senate prior to the age of 25. However, through the development of the office of the *vignitiviri*, the young members of the elite (seen as destined for and having a future capacity in middle age) were trained up in their early 20s as subordinates to older and more powerful magistrates.<sup>26</sup> This identifies for us a key principle in Roman thinking, the young, though unable to hold office due to their age, would be enabled to act in the future through association with older men undertaking a key role that the younger man might take up later, once he has attained the right age.

### Suetonius' *Claudius* – Understanding Age and Defining Disability

Embedded within the structure of Suetonius' biographies of the *Twelve Caesars* are a series of conceptions of age,<sup>27</sup> ranging from birth and infancy through boyhood, *adulescentia* and onto the subject of the biography as a *iuvenis*. There is also frequent reference to the transition from wearing a *toga praetexta* to wearing a *toga virilis* in a good number of Suetonius' lives, as well as the use of the word *aetatis*. As a whole, we may see the use of these age-related words and concepts by Suetonius as a means of explaining the progression of his subject through the lifespan. We will re-examine Claudius in relation to the deployment of these terms and seek to understand how his 'disability' was articulated in relation to his age and that particular point in his life course.

Suetonius sets up in the very early life of Claudius the relation between illness and identity that were to define him and, in so doing, Suetonius deploys most age-related terminologies associated with childhood and young adulthood.<sup>28</sup> Claudius has most of the age-related phases of childhood: as an *infans* – he lost his father. Illness is only recorded during (throughout) his *pueritia* and

<sup>26</sup> Dio 54.26.5.

<sup>27</sup> Donna Hurley, *Suetonius Divus Claudius* (2001), 79–81 on Claudius and age; Jacques Gascou, *Suétone Historien* (1984), 587–9 on marriages of Claudius; Alcide Macé, *Essai sur Suétone* (1900), 43–7 for Suetonius' experience of *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adulescentia*.

<sup>28</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 2; Hurley, *Claudius*, 79–81; Laes, 'Learning from Silence', 97, highlights how Claudius accepts then exposes naked the daughter of his wife Urgulanilla (father was the freedman, Boter) as an example of a disabled child – see Suet. *Claud.* 27, which does not make clear whether the child was disabled and the alternative that Claudius acted in anger with reference to his ex-wife's affair needs further consideration. The child may be seen to be socially disabled and a stigma. The whole episode illustrates Claudius' lack of agency and indecision, even when he does act to kill the child.

*adulescentia* and is not connected to his infancy. The result of continual illness was set out as he came of age (*aetatis*), and defined as incapacity which causes him to be unable to give public or private *munera*, and a need for him to remain *in tutela*. Due to on-going illness, he was the first person to preside at the games (given by his brother Germanicus) wearing a cloak. His assumption of the *toga virilis* was conducted in public but at night and he was transported in a litter without family members in attendance. This account sets us up with an emerging adult, who is disabled and unable to act. It is in the next section that Suetonius dwells on Claudius as a young man, *ab aetate prima* (in early adulthood), seeking recognition through publication of his written work, but unable to obtain *dignitas* (dignity).<sup>29</sup>

It is at the age of 21 or 22 that we see the dilemma Claudius presents to the aged Augustus and Tiberius in a letter to Livia, quoted by Suetonius.<sup>30</sup> Looking to the future, Augustus suggests that if he was ‘in command of his five senses’, he could have been advanced in the same way that his elder brother Germanicus had been – but if ‘handicapped’ his path led in another direction. The key impediment was that of movement, posture and gait.<sup>31</sup> The discussion was triggered by the upcoming games of Mars, but Augustus wanted to set up a protocol so that each occasion such as this would not result in a discussion of the public role of Claudius. Augustus’ fear was based on a realization that the public ridiculed those who appeared different. His immediate plan was to let Claudius preside at the dinner of priests at *Ludi Martialibus*, with kinsman on hand to ensure he did not look ridiculous, but at the games he was not sitting the imperial box with the rest of the imperial family. Looking to the upcoming Latin festival, Augustus wished to ensure Claudius did not attend with Germanicus at Mount Albano or even be in Rome, because if he did attend, he might see the post of City Prefect as attainable. The only official role Augustus permitted Claudius to have was that of augur and Claudius inherited relatively little from Augustus in AD 14 (800,000 sesterces). This policy of exclusion from office holding was also followed by Tiberius, suggesting the decision on how to deal with Claudius was taken in the final years of Augustus’ reign by both Tiberius and Augustus as the joint holders of *tribunicia potestas* (tribunician power). The result was for Claudius to withdraw to the suburbs of Rome or to his villa in Campania.<sup>32</sup> Having clarified the policy of Augustus and Tiberius, Suetonius then complicates the image of the powerless Claudius with reference to times in which a public role was assumed by him in his 20s and 30s under Tiberius.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 3.

<sup>30</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 4.

<sup>31</sup> Timothy O’Sullivan, *Walking in Roman Culture* (2011), 29–31.

<sup>32</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 5.

<sup>33</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 6.

He led delegations of the *equites* (knights) and was appointed by the senate to a priesthood of Augustus; whilst both *equites* and the senate respected him in public – perhaps because he utilized consular regalia – Tiberius consistently prevented him from having a role in the senate with reference to his disability. The choices of succession open to Tiberius were set out by Tacitus as a choice between Claudius at a good age (*aetate bonorum*) in his mid-40s, Caligula in robust *iuventus* in his early 20s or the adolescent Tiberius Gemellus in his early to mid-teens (*in pubertas*).<sup>34</sup> Claudius was discounted due to a perception of mental impairment and Caligula and Tiberius Gemellus became the heirs to the elderly emperor. Looking at Table 1.1, we can see the effect of the exclusion of Claudius in the context of the stages of life and in relation to the *mos maiorum* – he was denied a public role at the very time of life when one might have been expected.

Claudius' 40s (a good age) were marked not by achievement but by the ridicule that Augustus and Tiberius had sought to shield him from. Suetonius sets out the context for his ridicule by Caligula, because the emperor regarded the interpretation by the senate of his relationship with his uncle as that of a child in need of a guardian – Claudius is said to have been thrown into a river fully dressed on arrival in Germany.<sup>35</sup> At the age of 50 Claudius became emperor. Looking at Table 1.1, the age of 50 is a transition point that marks him at less of a good age (associated with his early 40s), but places him in early old age. Moreover, the models for contributing to the well-being of the *res publica* at this stage of life based their contribution, if we read Cicero *De senectute*, on an earlier stage of life which included public service. Such a role had been denied Claudius and he was thus seen to have been doubly impaired on becoming emperor at 50: disabled and inexperienced. These features should be added to those other negative aspects of old age that can be found in Latin literature.<sup>36</sup> Much of what follows in Suetonius concerns Claudius' public role over the course of the next 14 years until he died at the age of 64.<sup>37</sup> The remarkable feature for Suetonius is Claudius' ability to gain the qualities of emperors – *Auctoritas dignitasque formae* (a body with authority and dignity) – when standing or reclining, an aspect of the young Claudius said by Suetonius to be recognized by Augustus.<sup>38</sup> This can be understood as a disability, because as Tim O'Sullivan has shown, walking and an appropriate gait was a key element of a person's identity – Claudius simply does not shape up when walking.<sup>39</sup> The parallel between the Claudius as emperor and the Claudius as a young man is apparent here, and also in the conception of

<sup>34</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6.46.

<sup>35</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 8–9.

<sup>36</sup> See Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age*.

<sup>37</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 14–26.

<sup>38</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 4.

<sup>39</sup> O'Sullivan, *Walking in Roman Culture*.

the older Claudius as the servant of his wives and freed slaves – almost as though their relationship was not dissimilar to that of Claudius as an adult still having a tutor.<sup>40</sup> There is clarity here, Claudius is created in these texts as powerless with power taken from him by those who might, in other circumstances, care for an older man – a (younger) wife/wives and trusted freed slaves.<sup>41</sup>

## Emperors – the Interplay of Age and Disability

The example of Claudius has been discussed at some length, because his inability to be an effective ruler depended on an explicit approach set in motion by the fact that the people would ridicule him at the *Ludi Martialis* (Games of Mars) in AD 12. It prompted discussion of his disability and the effect this had on his public role. However, most of Suetonius' other emperors can be found to be disabled in respect of a convergence between their age and their personality. It is important to bear in mind that Suetonius views earlier emperors within a framework that creates Trajan and Hadrian as reference points with the former as *optimus princeps* ('most excellent emperor') and wielding imperial power from the age of 42 until his death at the age of 63.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Trajan died at an age at which many Romans expected to die, with both 42 and 63 being neat multiples of seven – conforming to Solon's division of age in Table 1.1. There is a contrast between the ideal of Trajan at the perfect age with Vespasian, who Suetonius could remember for a *dictum* (a saying) that made reference to his age. At his triumph, the emperor experienced what only royalty can know – a slow procession during which the monarch is on public display. Vespasian revelled in this moment commenting on his self-inflicted discomfort and his own foolishness for wanting a triumph in his old age.<sup>43</sup> Like other moments through his life course, when he did not fulfil the usual *mos maiorum*,<sup>44</sup> Suetonius uses the wrongness of the action for his age as a means to reveal Vespasian's humility and the absence of ambition from his nature. This is done through a reference back to Vespasian's ancestors and a statement by the emperor of their absence.<sup>45</sup> Like Cicero discussed above, there is a sense of achievement through actions during his adult stage of life. Both Suetonius' *Life of Vespasian* and Cicero's published

<sup>40</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 25, 28–9; see Gascou, *Suétone*, 739–44; Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Compare Plin. *Ep.* 8.18 contrast to 3.1; *Paneg.* 4.7, 42, 83, 88.

<sup>42</sup> Using Dio's chronology 68.6.3; Eutr. 8.2 has Trajan born in AD 53 rather than AD 56; on the life course of Trajan see Paul Roche, 'Pliny's thanksgiving: an introduction to the *Panegyricus*', in *Pliny's Praise: The Panegyricus in the Roman World*, ed. idem. (2011), 18–22.

<sup>43</sup> Suet. *Vesp.* 12.

<sup>44</sup> That is after assuming the *toga virilis* Suet. *Vesp.* 2.

<sup>45</sup> Suet. *Vesp.* 12.

speeches make reference to bias against the man in power – whose ancestry, and in Vespasian's case the additional handicap of the improper pronunciation of Latin words, did not match their elevated status. Thus, age did not disempower Vespasian. For Suetonius, it is age that disables Galba as emperor rather than the disability of his body.<sup>46</sup> The prediction that he would become emperor but not until his old age was made when he was a young boy, only to be confirmed by portents later in his life time.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, to Claudius, Galba's life had been lived in the public eye, despite his physical disability; whereas Claudius had been hidden from the public. Galba takes on this quality of old age and combines it with one of Claudius' traits – being controlled by others. In Galba's case, he was controlled by three men living in the palace with him: Titus Vinius, Cornelius Laco and Icelus Marcianus – recalled as his three tutors.<sup>48</sup> Suetonius is very clear that Galba's unpopularity was because of his age and the specific fact that he was a *senex* – a view shared by Plutarch.<sup>49</sup> The denial of age, for this 73-year-old, was strengthened by flattery and the soldiers' *dictum* after his death: *Galba Cupido, fuaris aetate tua* (Galba Cupid, exalt in your age).<sup>50</sup> The concept that the absence of a son made Galba unpopular with everyone is dismissed by Suetonius, it was due to the fact that he was a *senex*.<sup>51</sup> At 73 years of age, he was, see Table 1.1, at the very end of his life course and associated with all the characteristics of the very old.

Young emperors cannot escape the abilities and disabilities of their age, any more than the more elderly. Suetonius alludes to the possible explanation of Nero's wantonness, lust, extravagance, avarice and cruelty as the follies of youth – *iuvenili errore*.<sup>52</sup> However, he makes clear that these were in fact not due to his stage of life but were defects of his person. William Harris has shown us how a ruler needed to restrain their anger and Augustus provides the guide to when a ruler may exercise his anger:

- in public business: to be avoided – Augustus forgives the Alexandrians for their opposition
- in relation to the family: is justified – Augustus physically attacks the lover of Julia

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<sup>46</sup> Suet. *Galba* 21.

<sup>47</sup> Suet. *Galba* 4 and 9.

<sup>48</sup> Suet. *Galba* 14.

<sup>49</sup> Suet. *Galba* 17 and 19; Charles Murrison, *Suetonius: Galba, Otho, Vitellius* (1992), 77 incorrectly seeks to explain the role of age away.

<sup>50</sup> Suet. *Galba* 20.

<sup>51</sup> Suet. *Galba* 17.

<sup>52</sup> Suet. *Nero* 26.

- in relation to slaves: is brutal – for a trivial offence a slave is nailed to the mast of a ship.<sup>53</sup>

With reference to all other characteristics of a person, any trait could become a defect just as anger could.<sup>54</sup> However, the encroachment from the private or world of the *domus* (home) into the public realm is the point at which the emperor is revealed to have a disability in Suetonius. Thus, Galba only becomes disabled when he arrives in Rome and is revealed as an old man, who in private is dominated by others – a trait which spills over into the public realm.

### Conclusion: Disability and Age in the Early Roman Empire

The stages of life set out above and our discussion of the relationship between age and the inability to act as emperor points to the importance of age and ageism amongst adults in mid-life towards both the elderly and the young. Karen Cokayne has pointed out in connection with medical writers that old age was a form of illness from which you could not recover, just as childhood and youth might be understood via paediatrics as a condition from which all will recover, if they survived to adulthood and a life of virtue, and were not led into vice.<sup>55</sup> We can find evidence for those who lived well with their age, but their age could determine how they were treated by others and that treatment could limit their capacity to act (as we can see from example of Galba above).<sup>56</sup> It is age rather than physical impairment that could disable a person, whether a Claudius or a Galba, once in power. In addition, Claudius' physical disability caused him, on gaining power, to have little to no experience of holding power.<sup>57</sup> For this additional reason, he had a disability unlike others in old age – he could not provide the defence that he had gained experience as an adult in mid-life, as found for example in Cicero's *Cato Maior de Senectute*.<sup>58</sup> That defence accepted the physical incapacity of old age and the physical deterioration of the body, but could still assert mental vitality and wisdom gained from experience. All true in principle, but as we have seen with Galba, the old were seen to have an inability

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<sup>53</sup> Harris, *Restraining Rage* (2001), 245–6, based on Plut. *Mor.* 207C on sayings of Augustus that reveal a need to control his anger and provides examples of the ways in which anger caused a loss of control on the part of the *princeps*, even when father of his country in 2 BC as well as when a young man.

<sup>54</sup> See Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius* (1982), 152–8.

<sup>55</sup> Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age*, 34–56.

<sup>56</sup> See examples in *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Compare Plin. *Ep.* 3.1 on link between public work and capacity to act in old age.

<sup>58</sup> Especially sections 2.4 and 18.62–66 – discussed by J.G.F. Powell, *Cicero: Cato Maior de Senectute* (1988).

to act and were to be mocked by others.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, there were Romans to be emulated who had reached their 77th year with sight and hearing intact and were still physically agile – these were the old to be admired.<sup>60</sup> It should also be noted that there was an expectation of rashness and errors on the part of the young that needed to be separated as normative behaviour from the actions based on character – as we saw in the case of Nero. Ultimately, adult men in mid-life were constructed as having the positive qualities of youth and old age, which provided a means to marginalize the young and old as less able, or even disabled, when compared to themselves.

### Table 1.1 Age divisions from Antiquity

This table, based on the divisions and terminology, described by Tim Parkin,<sup>61</sup> illustrates the various ways different authors in Antiquity articulated the stages of the life course. These divisions, as stated above, bore little relation to biological ageing but were useful rhetorical devices and reflect a cultural understanding of behaviour associated with age stages. These stages are not a reflection of all social realities but a way of structuring the social and political world; there is a marked congruence with the model version of the Roman political *cursus honorum* (see above).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age*, 53–6 for examples.

<sup>60</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 3.1 on Spurrina.

<sup>61</sup> Parkin, 'Life Cycle'.

<sup>62</sup> Harlow and Laurence, 'Growing Up and Growing Old'.

	Solon	Philo	Prolomy	Varro	Diogenes Laertius	Isidore of Seville 1	Isidore of Seville 2	Phasing
growth of teeth 0–7	<i>paidion</i> (small child) 0–7	<i>brephos</i> (infant) 0–4	<i>puer</i> (child) 0–15	<i>pais</i> (child) 0–20	<i>infantia</i> 0–7	<i>infantia</i> 0–7	Developing Adult	
capacity to emit seed 7–14	<i>pais</i> (child) 7–14	<i>pais</i> (child) 4–14			<i>pueritia</i> (childhood) 7–14	<i>pueritia</i> (childhood) 7–14		
growth of beard 14–21	<i>meirakion</i> (youth) 14–21	<i>meirakion</i> (youth) 14–22	<i>adulescens</i> (young adult) 15–30		<i>adolescentia</i> (youth) 14–28	<i>adolescentia</i> (youth) 14–28		
increase in strength 21–28	<i>neaniskos</i> (young adult) 21–28	<i>neaniskos</i> (young adult) 22–41		<i>neaniskos</i> (young adult) 20–40			Adulthood	
ripeness for marriage 28–35	<i>aner</i> (adult) 28–49		<i>iuvenis</i> (adult) 30–45		<i>iuventus</i> (adulthood) 28–49	<i>iuventus</i> (adulthood) 28–49		
understanding reaches full bloom 35–42								
improvement of mind and reasoning 42–49		<i>aner</i> (adult) 41–56	<i>senior</i> (older person) 45–60	<i>aner</i> (adult) 40–60				
perfection of mind and reasoning 49–56	<i>presbutes</i> (older person) 49–56				<i>gravitas</i> (maturity) 49–70	<i>senectus</i> (old age) 49–77	Aging Adult	
emergence of moderateness 56–63	<i>geron</i> (old person) 56+	<i>presbutes</i> (older person) 56–68						
beginning of deterioration 63–70		<i>geron</i> 68+	<i>senex</i> 60+	<i>geron</i> 60–80	<i>senectus</i> 70+	<i>senium</i> 77+		

Source: Tim Parkin, 'Life Cycle'.

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